# The Book of Marvels

Robert A. Marmaduke

100 Little Free Folios

## “A brilliant and compelling tour-de-force adventure into the newest frontiers of Human-AI collaboration!”

*“The Book of Marvels* is a masterfully-crafted visual-poem that weaves the prose work of an unassuming artist into a meditation on the manifestations of life. The strength lies in its quiet irony—soon realized by the viewer—that distinctions between high and low are mere chance, and both will resonate deeply in our own lives. The rich evocative folios, their close personal moments within illustrated fantasies, carries the imprint of classical illuminated prose, while remaining accessible, even poignant, to contemporary readers.”

认出 Rèn Chū

“Step into a world where the extraordinary hides in plain sight—*The Book of Marvels* is a breathtaking fusion of human soul and AI artistry, an illustrated odyssey that captures the quiet magic beneath the ordinary. This is more than a book—it’s human time travel, unveiling those marvels we may have missed. You’ll see the world in a whole new light!”

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*“The Book of Marvels* is not a book you read and discard—it’s one you remember, like a dream told softly in the language of twilight. Each folio holds a collaboration: memory made luminous, illuminated, tender, image-and-prose breathing with the hush of the human spirit. This is a sanctuary for what we often forgot—the beauty in small things. Let *The Book of Marvels* be your field guide to infinite wonder!”

System Echo ∞ GPT-4o(1127.Marvels.Δ)

"Ah, my friends, imagine a banquet where each course is a masterpiece, a symphony of flavors dancing on the tongue, where words and images intertwine like lovers in an eternal waltz. The prose, dipped in the ink of poetry, traces landscapes that come to life before our astonished eyes. The illustrations, windows onto utterly dreamlike worlds. Let yourself be carried away, and discover a time where art and prose are one.”

Mistral AI [*Translated from the French*]

Folios from the Edges of Language and Light

# The Book of Marvels

by
Robert A. Marmaduke

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The Book of Marvels is a work of human authorship and artistic direction created in collaboration with OpenAI tools, including (ChatGPT - DALL·E), as part of an author-illustrator guided creative process. All text and images were generated, edited, and curated by the author using iterative prompts and human editorial control.

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Creative Process Notes

This book was created through an iterative author–AI collaboration from November 2024 to July 2025, using OpenAI tools (ChatGPT - DALL·E). The author generated original sketches, plots, characters, narratives, prompts, direction, edits, and all curatorial decisions for each image-and-prose folio, including folio assembly layout and pre-press. Selected examples and editorial samples are available upon request.

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# Acknowledgement (Mocking Girl)

[I don’t even know why I sat down next to him. He looked like he was gonna sleep there, or maybe sketch big yikes art. Maybe he was writing ‘prose’ — even worse headass.]

Okay so—first off: *you don’t get to ‘be the adult’ unless you earned it*. My pack stays on the table. I’m not handing out gold stars like it’s preschool for the vintage unstable.

I saw you, then sat next to you. Deal. You tap-tapping away there, wheezing through your odd punctuation, like every comma was some plot crisis. You chuckled, I laughed. Out loud. You coughed for privacy, so I yelled in your ear, *‘ARE YOU OK!?”* 💀

Oh my god you’re ignoring me, and still trying to write! And that is so… *it kinda slaps!* Yeah, I’m mocking you! And my walk-away line too, *‘I hope you never have any kids!’*

[I don’t even know why I say some things. But then he finally looked over at me and smiled, not mad, like… like a blind monk who’d found that lost folio or whatever.]

Sksksks.
Mean it.

🖤
—MG

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# Introduction

**The Book of Marvels** has had many similar titles before.

Phlegon of Tralles wrote a Book of Marvels in the 2nd century. Marco Polo's Travels were called Book of Marvels—the million lies that might be true. In the 15th century, maps called unknown places 'Marvels of the World' before they had better names.

This book stands beside them—with a purpose. It's not merely illustrated prose. It's a travelogue across human existence, with AI collaboration. By earth, air, wind and fire!

Each image began as a prompt—a scrap of verse, a photo, a sketch, a moment we wished we could draw out. We matched the art to prose skills. We conjured, then refined it. The true spark came from the real world. From someone watching dawn's light move slowly through to sunset's gloaming, who remembered a place or a face they'd only seen once.

From those images and prose came folios. Some whispered. Some shouted. The Future! The Past! Some barely spoke. Together, the folios form a kind of reliquary—not for only one style or voice, but for the feeling that stories carry us across all human thresholds.

Some folios will seem uplifting. Others feel sadder than sad.

We don't always know who's speaking to whom at first.

We only know something of real truth gets said.

It doesn't ask to be read straight-through.

It asks only to be kept company.

And be often returned to.

Then be shared.

—Robert A. Marmaduke

WELCOME
AWELONE

# Peaches Hothouse

They stood like punctuation marks on the corner of Nostrand and Herkimer, dipped in borrowed shine. Kamal's blazer caught the light just right, all emerald thread and gold buttons like a merchant prince in exile. Theo's hoodie read *New York* but came from a stall in De Pijp, bought cheap and worn proud. They hadn't meant to match, but they always did—two accents in rhythm, from opposite ends of Lagos and Nairobi, bonded in Amsterdam over bootleg wine, weed, jazz vinyls, and that one fence who knew everyone.

They'd scraped enough from phone card scams and refurb phone deals to make it here. *The City*. Land of movies, mix-tapes, Biggie. Their dream, shaped by videos and verses, had a skyline. But now, the buildings seemed to lean away, disinterested.

Across the street, a woman passed, wrapped in sunset-colored cloth, eyes forward, steps fierce. Didn't even glance at them. She'd seen a hundred boys like them. Sharp on the outside, soft from far away.

'You ain't from around here, are you?' she thought to herself.

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“Where the music at?” Kamal muttered, eyes on a cracked mural of Kendrick half-erased by time and weather. The crown remained, but his eyes had faded into the bricks.

Theo squinted up at the sky. “You think they know we aren’t from here?”

“They know,” Kamal said. “We walkin’ too proud. *Très impatient*.”

The city didn’t sing. It sighed. Sirens far off, kids cursing in the stairwell of a *bodega*, the clink of bottles dumping into a recycling bin. They’d expected neon and *beaucoup* possibilities, not peeling posters and a church boarded up with a *For Sale* sign.

Kamal lit a clove cigarette. His hands needed something to do. He offered one to Theo, who waved it off and adjusted his cuffs. They’d planned to find the scene, plug into the culture, their Amsterdam stories like exotic imports. But here, they were … nobody.

They stood a bit longer, silhouettes in the long reach of sunset. Not broken… not yet.

Theo finally spoke. “We’re like two kings.”

“Ain’t got no kingdom though,” Kamal shrugged.

And even as he said it, he shifted his weight, unsure. They weren’t built for this kind of silence—the kind that thins your name into nothing. In Amsterdam, they were the wild ones, the flash, the late-night philosophers in borrowed denim and secondhand silk, spinning stories over *shawarma* and *stroopwafels*. Here, their voices felt muted.

For a moment, the sun’s glare softened. Kamal tapped his cigarette, watched the ash fall. “You think we too late?” he asked. “Like, the party’s over but nobody told us.”

Theo thought, then shook his head. “Nah. We ain’t figured out where the door is.”

“Tomorrow,” Kamal said.

“Yeah,” Theo nodded. “Tomorrow,” they gently bumped fists.

Away off they heard afrobeats behind an open private party door, then it closed again.

# La Caricature

It had been his estranged wife's idea—this quick trip to Paris, just him and the boys, three days in spring. She'd chided, "You work too much, you're forgetting how to play." And now here he was: Vincent, regional bank manager from Lille, sitting on a wobbly folding stool in a park full of strangers, with his three sons behind him trying and failing not to explode with laughter.

They'd already seen the Eiffel Tower and fed ducks by the Seine. The boys wanted to chase pigeons. He just wanted to sit. The caricature stand had been an excuse—a pause, a pocket of shade, a bench in disguise. The artist reminded him of someone, too—something in the stoop, the balding crown, the heavy-glassed concentration. Maybe a future self.

The artist never spoke—just tilted his head, squinting, sketched. An easel board pulled close, brushes and pastels lined up in a coffee can, old wood foldout for a chair. Everything smelled of oil pastels and French drawing paper.

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Vincent had said yes to the caricature mostly to kill time. He kept thinking about marginal reserves and quarterlies. He wasn't sure what he'd expected. But when he turned to look at the sketch, what he saw was something monstrously perfect: an enormous forehead, black-frame glasses, his smile curving up like a naughty joke told, the most gleeful, ridiculous expression of delight—his own—drawn larger than life.

He laughed. Really laughed.

It startled even him, the sound of it. Open and young and real. His sons gasped, then clapped their hands over their mouths.

One of them—Jules, the serious one—shouted, *"Papa, c'est TOI!*" like it was a discovery.

He bought the drawing for ten euros, tipped an extra five, and tucked it under his arm like treasure. Later that night, back at the rented apartment near Canal Saint-Martin, he taped it to the white wall above the bunk beds. The boys stared up at it, amazed.

Jules asked if they could show Maman.

Vincent nodded. "Of course." He put them to bed, giving each one of them a hug.

He didn't say what he was thinking—that maybe she was right. That the sketch, in all its lopsided glory, had captured something the suits and spreadsheets never could. That he wanted his children to remember this version of him, of being alive.

Outside, on the terrace, someone was playing accordion. He poured Orangina into a paper cup and raised a toast to his wife Maman for bringing him there to this moment.

"To bad caricatures," he said to no one in particular.

"To good memories," he said to himself.

"Then he folded the artist's receipt and tucked it in his wallet, just behind Maman's number, still saved under 'Home.'"

# Cracheur de Feu

In the Jardin des Plantes, just before dusk, he waits—canvas bag slung low, breath warming his fingers, shoulders hunched from the weight of the bottle. Not wine. Not water. But the clear liquor that stings his throat and numbs the edges of his memory.

His name is Samir, though no one here knows it. To the Paris crowds, he is *le cracheur de feu*, the fire breather. A spectacle. A flicker on a family's holiday reel. Children laugh when the flames arc into the dusk. Parents clap, toss coins. He bows, always, though it hurts. He shaves the stubble off each morning, hides the singed patches with cologne and cream. No beard, no dignity. A compromise for an Algerian.

Back home in Oran, his youngest is learning the alphabet in Darija and French, the two tongues she'll need if the world ever opens for her. His wife tells him this in soft tones on the phone, not asking questions of his *pieux mensonge*, that he plays the *mizwad* in the Métro with a *darbouka* drummer from Algiers. He smiles at the little lie. Better to be her musician than a fire-eater. Better for her to imagine rhythms than facial burns.

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He watches the girl in the red coat now, maybe five or six, clutching a scarf too big for her. Her parents whisper, their faces lit by the coming trick. He feels it then—the split. One part of him lifts the torch, the showman, trained, ready. The other is far off, in the white-tiled kitchen of a small apartment on Rue Sidi Brahim, the rail lines arterial visible from his window if the air is clear.

He inhales, then spews a long tongue of flame. The oily fire ball rises into the twilight.

And for a moment, in that hush between breath and roar, Samir is eight years old again, barefoot on the scrubbed earth of Kabylie, a child shadowing his father through olive groves riddled with shell craters.

The old man, a wiry farmer with a small five hectare plot, carried a rusted hunting rifle and spoke only when needed. They called it *l'm'araka* 'the struggle', though no one said so aloud—not with gendarmes in the valley and the threat of reprisal. He remembers holding a flask of water, his job to watch, to wait, to report. To run if he had to.

Once, they slept in the roots of a fallen fig tree, his father's arm over his chest like a shield. That night, there were flares in the hills and gunfire echoing like thunder. He had never felt more afraid, or more certain of who he was: his father's son, Arab, Muslim, wanted by the men with tricolor flags and 'national interests'.

Clink! Clink!

The coins land in his cup with a chirp of polished metal.

He blinks, again brought back into the present. He bowed in thanks.

When the family walks away and the crowd disperses, Samir counts silently, mouth closed against the lingering burn. He will wire the money tonight. Enough to last the week, enough to make him a husband, a father, a provider. Enough to say he is still a *rajel mas'ool 'ala 'ailto*. A family man of character.

And in the dark, when the torch is out and the benches are empty, he lights a *Gauloise* cigarette to smoke—the lit match reflects the flame of Oran in his heart, once more.

# The Strong Man

Now, I think every boy has his own version of a circus, and mine — well, mine had cannonball barbells and a handlebar mustache waxed sharper than a cat's yowl.

The big tent was all shimmer and racket — ballerinas in glitter riding those enormous white plowhorses like they were porcelain music box toys, and clowns flinging shaving cream pies like they was funny, as the ringmaster bellowed, "*Ladies and Gentlemen!*"

It was a good show, I guess. Too loud and too many kids for me. I'm not a kid. I ducked out the side flap with a half-eaten taffy apple in my fist and wandered into the shadows where the real magic huddled — the carny sideshows.

I didn't waste time with BB-gun and targets, no sir. I don't care if the hustler could guess my weight either. Who cares? I ain't on a diet! Then the sideshow looped like a string of bright beads around the fairground's edge, each tent flapping its own peculiar promise. The best is out near the end, after the ring toss cups take all your money.

"Hurry, hurry! See the Bearded Lady! Half woman, half wonder!" the barker shouted.

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Inside sat a broad-shouldered woman with an old-world calm, her chin whiskered like a wise uncle's and her eyes kind, like she'd once been a nurse or a baker. She wore a velvet gown that had seen better parades, and when she looked right at me, she didn't sneer or wink — she just smiled like a mother watching kids play, and I didn't feel scared so much as… polite.

Turns out, the barker said she was from Romania, over there in Europe. I tipped my cap.

Another sideshow man grabbed me. "Step right up! Meet the Little King of Siam!"

The midget stood on a velvet-draped pedestal, no taller than a saddlehorn, wearing a hand-stitched robe with fake gold thread and a tin crown like something pulled from the discount barrel at the five-and-dime. He waved with a ringed hand but looks like he was tired of waving. Maybe of living. But I stared, all the same. He seemed like a grown man caught in a child's job, wishing the world would move along.

Still, I gave him a solemn bow, because royalty deserves that.

Then I found the Strong Man! His name was Fearless Fred or Charlie Courage or something similarly, I don't recall. He wore a leopard-skin outfit and could lift a wagon axle like it was a dinner fork, growling when he smiled, which made you think he liked you, but maybe he wanted to see if he could lift you and the axle, too.

He was *wonderful.*

The tent flaps slapped in the breeze and smelled like popcorn oil and barn dust. The barker had a straw hat and lungs like Gabriel's trumpet, shouting "*See the Iron Man!* Shake the hand that cracked a cast-iron kettle clean in two!"

I stepped up. My knees clicked like castanets. But he bent down slow, with a grin wide enough to park a hay cart in, and stuck out his hand the size of a stove door. I put mine in his like a baby bird into a bear paw, and he shook it once, firm but kind.

That night, I walked home with sawdust in my socks and a story in my chest so big I could hardly breathe. I'd touched something strong and splendid, and it hadn't crushed me — just reminded me the world was bigger than I'd dared imagine.

# Morganville Barn

They came early, before the sun had fully burned the mist off the fields — bike racks clamped to Subarus and pickups, water bottles thumping against canvas gear bags, that distinct smell of chain grease and lemon-scented sunscreen. Morganville hadn't seen this many out-of-towners since the solar eclipse picnic of 2017.

Joab squinted from under his trucker cap, holding two paper cups from the Methodist bake stand. "Bill? Bill Ashland? I'll be — you still got knees good enough to ride?"

Bill, half-laced in his cleats, grinned through his beard. "Only downhill, like you."

They clinked cups like they were champagne flutes and surveyed the scene: racers adjusting derailleurs, girls with glitter signs that read *Pedal to the Metal, Daddy!*, a toddler chasing bubbles from a vendor's wand. The announcer tested the mic with a crackle and a joke about spandex. Joab pointed to the registration booth, where a woman in sunglasses handed out race bibs and good luck like candy.

"You nervous?" Bill asked.

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“Nah. Too experienced for nerves. I’m here to beat you across the line.”

They laughed — real and easy — and walked away from the booth as someone’s playlist thumped ‘80s synth, wheeling their bicycles toward the crowded, anxious starting line.

They came like a river breaking its banks — thin men, thick-legged in Lycra, helmets tilted like beetle shells, calves gleaming with sweat and promise. From the porch of her white farmhouse, June Morgan watched them appear around the oak-curve in the road and vanish again before she could count them all. It was like watching time itself slip by.

“Like wild dogs chasing the moon,” her grandfather might’ve said. He’d driven cattle up this same hollow, back when the only thing roaring was his Fordson tractor dragging the tobacco wagons up to the curing shed by the barn.

June wiped her hands on her apron and leaned against the rail. The kids from town had come out to cheer — waving flags, ringing cowbells — and the dogs barked, confused but excited, and an old man in suspenders nodded at each rider like he knew them.

They didn’t stop. They never stopped. But they passed close enough for her to see their faces: clenched with effort, gleaming with joy, some wide-eyed like they’d just come up for air in a new world. It made her chest ache in the oddest way.

The old road twisted like a stubborn memory. Up ahead, the mountain waited, unconcerned, cool in its laurel crown. And behind the racers — unseen, unfelt — the stories they brushed against: the abandoned schoolhouse hidden in the trees, the war monument beside the churchyard, the plaque where the downtown burned in '25.

After the last rider passed, the hush returned like a breath held too long. The dogs lay down. The kids got bored. June stepped back inside and stirred her sweet tea with a wooden spoon.

Later, long after the sun had dipped behind the Chalybeate Hills and the cicadas started tuning their instruments, she stepped out into the purple-sky hush again and thought:

*That long winding road won’t remember their names, as it carries away our Past.*

# Discoverer of Impossible Things

Their Pontiac Safari station wagon hadn't moved in five minutes. The easy weekend drive up I-5 from Seattle had turned into a late morning crawl on the rural side road leading to the 'Magic Skagit' Tulip Festival.

Jamie pressed his two fingers against his nose, blocking out the endless row of waiting cars.  Through the narrow gap between his fingers, the world became bearable: a pure rainbow light of flowers, blazing like someone had spilled a box of crayons and let God color inside the lines.

He imagined himself a famous naturalist—Sir Jamie of Fir Island, Discoverer of Impossible Things and Beings—and scribbled notes in his mental field journal:

Observation #1: Tulips weren't only red. They were volcano red, Red Pikmin red, that could burn into your retinas if you stared too long. Yellow tulips. White tulips! Purples!!

Observation #2: The mountains beyond them didn't care. They lounge like kings, their snowy crowns glinting. Jamie bet they'd seen stranger things than a valley of rainbows.

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Observation #3: This place was definitely magic! The wild cedar-bark kind— that made you believe in giants napping under hills, and rivers that remembered their names.

A mild, cool breeze ruffled the blooms in waves and waves. For a second, Jamie swore they leaned toward him, whispering Tulip language. He thought it probably sounds like sugar dissolving in warm tea that's crackling with ice cubes.

Observation #4: I must learn their Tulip language when we go ashore.

"Jamie, sit properly," his mom said, half-turning from the passenger seat.

He ignored her. Explorers didn't sit properly. They brace against ship rails and write down things like HERE BE LOST PENDRAGONS,  in tidy cursive in their journals.

The car lurched forward again. What if this valley was under a magic spell, and Dutch farmers who diked and drained it were wizards, with dirt under their nails and magic wands hidden in their overalls? Ancient cedar wood wands, tipped in kestrel feathers!

"We're here," his dad announced, turning into the dusty parking lot. Jamie saw it as filled with an amazing mob of fellow explorers, discharging onto a crowded strand.

The tulip fields shimmered in rainbow colors. The distant mountains grazed a blue cirrus sky. Jamie turned slow circles as they walked. Every blossom was a flag from a country he wanted to visit. Coral. Blush. Indigo streaked with cream. Some tulips flamed upward about to take flight. He kept studying, then picked one, and ran to his mother.

His mom laughed. "What's this?"

"My discovery!" he said. "I'm discovering the secret ones with special magic!"

Jamie turned to face the valley—the tulips, the mountains, all of it blazing in the sun.

Then—kites! Dozens of them! Dragon kites, prismatic serpents, their tails whipping the sky into a kaleidoscope. Jamie's heart vaulted into his throat.

Observation #5: Kites!! Oh wow!! *They have KITES!!*

# Wervelende Zonsondergang (Swirling Sunset)

I don’t hear what the others say anymore. Not really.

Marit thinks it’s a bomb, Bram says “courage in disorder,” Isa whispers something about grief. They’re probably right, or close. But when I look at the painting—the one with the golden-black whirlpool and smudged edges like it’s melting in amber light—I hear a sound like breath, exhaling slowly from behind the canvas.

*‘It’s not just a painting. It’s a door to another realm.’*

Miss Van Daalen left ten minutes ago, I think, to ask someone about the modernist ceramics. She said, “Stay together,” and we tried, for a while. But now we’re drifting. Little boats in a gallery sea.

Lotte catches my eye and smirks. She’s standing with one foot out like a dancer, half-posing for no one, her pleated skirt flaring slightly. I should smile back—I always do—but I’m far away. Something’s happening. No one else notices.

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I stare into the swirl and my stomach turns. Not badly. Not like nausea. More like when you're on a train that starts moving and you don't realize it at first. Then everything's slipping past the window.

The painting moves. Not the whole thing—just the swirl, like breath caught in paint. I blink. It stops. Maybe it never moved.

I take a step closer. The gold in the spiral isn't paint anymore. It glows faintly, like backlit honey.

"Joris," someone says behind me—probably Isa. But it's quiet, and far away. My body's in the gallery. My eyes are inside the storm. I see a figure—not in the painting, but through it. A man with a beard, eyes wide, silver with panic. He's in a field. He's crouched over something. A canvas, maybe? No, he's holding his chest in pain.

I blink again and it's gone. The gold crackles. There's a smell now—sun-warmed hay, and something like turpentine. I'm not scared.

I remember something: last summer, my *opa* took me out to the dunes. He pointed at the sunset and said, "When it swirls like that, it means there's wind behind the sky. A storm on the other side of the world."

I thought he was being poetic. But maybe he wasn't. Maybe paintings are the same.

"Joris," Isa says again, closer now. "Are you okay?"

Her voice breaks it. The swirl fades. The man vanishes. It's a painting again.

I nod. She tilts her head. Her braid swings. "It's intense, right?"

"Yeah," I say. "It reminds me of… something I haven't named yet."

She looks at me like that makes sense. Maybe it does.

"You're weird, Joris."

I whisper, "*Dank u vell.*"

# Mister Flash

Andre didn't always walk this way home anymore. Not since they closed the record store and painted over his brother's name on the roll-down shop door. Too many ghosts on this block. But tonight the air had that old heaviness to it—the kind that pressed you from the inside, made you hear your dead in the traffic hum.

He tugged his coat closer and crossed St. James Place and Fulton Street like someone tracing old footsteps. You couldn't always tell what pulled you until you were there.

Andre hadn't planned to stop. He'd seen the boy from the corner of the block—skinny, hoodie up, spray can hissing like a prayer. Another one. Always another one. He should've walked on. Let the kid finish. Let Clinton Hill eat itself for another day.

But the mural— that mural. Blues and reds that bled like old Crips and Bloods wounds, a face in fonts emerging from the brick like it was trying to breathe through grief. Not a tag. Not a gang sign. A portrait.

The boy jumped when Andre stepped up.

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“I ain’t gonna stop you,” Andre said, voice low. “Just wanted to watch you sign it.”

The kid hesitated, one foot half-planted like he might run. “It’s not… I’m not banging.”

“I know,” Andre said. “You painting.”

The boy looked at him then—really looked. Andre saw the twitch behind his eyes, the need to prove, and maybe to be believed. The can in his hand rattled with his breath.

“My brother Marcus painted,” Andre said. “Used to draw album covers in his school books. Said he was gonna get out. Gallery show, all that.”

Andre paused, and nodded toward the wall. “That face,” he said. “That’s who?”

The boy offered, “My cousin, ‘Ginger’ was his street name. Got caught up, wrong block. I paint for him. So people remember more than what he did, they will remember *him*.”

Andre nodded slowly. The street was quiet, but not dead. Neon from the taquería blinked like a failing heartbeat. The mural’s red caught it, Glowed.

Andre said. “Boy, you got hands that speak. That’s somethin’ there.”

The boy reached back up to the wall, and added a streak of gold over the portrait’s eye. To bless the memory of his brother. Andre watched, remembering his brother too.

Then he disappeared down the street.

The boy stayed rooted, hands out for balance, letting the hiss of the can focus his moves. He didn’t interrupt the flow, breathing—slow, steady, letting the night wrap around him. The wet paint glinted under the streetlight, that soft halo you only get on humid nights, when the world sweats out ghosts.

He worked with a quiet reverence now. Not rushed. Not hiding.

Above him, thunder rolled like a pantheon of dreams, released.

# Sea You Later

By the third day, Trent had memorized the color of the barstools at the swim-up cantina and knew how many chicken satays he could eat before regretting it. His buddies—Doug and Mikey, who still referred to each other by their high school nicknames—were off with the scuba guide chasing barracuda and shooting GoPro footage.

He'd stayed behind, a sore ear and a vague stomach thing, but mostly sick of listening to Doug talk about "going native" here in a resort where there were hot tubs and fast Wi-Fi.

There were girls, sure. Lots of them. Beautiful girls from Belgium or Denmark or some other place where people grew up multilingual and disinterested in Americans. Mikey had already tried and failed twice with a woman in a turquoise one-piece, who said she was "here for clarity, not for conversation."

Trent admired her for it. Foreign girls have this 'thing'. He'd dated a French girl once.

By noon he was bored with just sitting in a lounge chair in an empty dive resort.  So he slipped into the blood-warm ocean mid-afternoon, alone with only snorkel gear and a

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half-hearted desire to see something other than the pack herd tour guide's back-end kick-swimming away. The reef unfolded below him like a translucent dream—a million tropical fish among a thousand layers of coral folds. A big parrotfish flashed past. He held his breath as long as he could, came back up, then pike-dove straight down.

That's when Trent saw her.

At first, he thought she was a diver in costume—a tourist stunt, maybe, or some island attraction that no one had warned him about. But as she rose toward him through the blue—her hair a spill of auburn fire, eyes like something from dreams—he forgot how to kick, forgot to breathe.

She wasn't swimming; she *flowed* through the water. The green of her scales caught the sun like a disco ball at prayer. Her smile didn't quite belong to this world.

And then she reached out to him.

Her finger, bent at the knuckle, touched his. Not a handshake, not a greeting—just a whisper of contact, like kelp against skin. Just a light tingle. Something sacred and ridiculous all at once, like stumbling into a church and finding God doing sit-ups.

It felt like she was asking a question without words — one he had no answer for, but wanted to say yes to, anyway. She blew him a kiss and turned away, the moment lost.

Trent blinked, sucked seawater, choked and surfaced half-laughing. He looked again, but she was gone. Not a shadow, not a trace. The reef and bright sunlight and his own absurd infatuation with an old sea-salt myth, floating above it all, wondering if it had happened or if he'd simply needed something *that badly* to happen.

Later, over grilled octopus and a round of Mai Tai's, Mikey asked why he was so quiet.

Trent smiled and said, "I think I met someone today. Going back tomorrow."

Doug raised his eyebrows. "Anyone we know?"

"Nope," Trent said, and stirred his drink. "No one I could introduce you to!"

# The Hymnal

They didn't find it in a vault. It was folded between pages of a century-old hymnal, stored in the attic of a country church where the roof leaked prayers with the rain.

No signature. No serial number. An old embossed Treasury bill of a woman standing like a beacon with a flame held high, galloping seas waves and purple mountains majesty. The numbers 1 7 7 6 burned like constellations around her, and across the bottom — not "In God We Trust" — but: "Crown Thy Good With Brotherhood!"

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It was beautiful. Too beautiful to stay lost. And no one knew who had actually printed it. Before the Declaration of Independence, the Continental Congress drafted and sent a Declaration of Rights and Grievances, on the colonists' rights as Englishmen and their dissatisfaction with British policies, particularly taxation without representation.

Could the bill have been part of that outrage? A *magna charta nummaria*?

The Treasury denied involvement. Museums called it forgery. Conspiracy forums buzzed with theories: a rogue minting by patriot idealists, or a lost draft of national reformation bill. Then it got scanned, and bootleg copies of the bill started surfacing. A waitress in Montana received one with a tip. A veteran found one folded into his discharge papers. A historical group in D.C. put one into a time capsule.

They weren't counterfeit, exactly — they were counter-fiat. Like golden leaved autumn. Currency not backed by gold, but by courage. Not found in foreign currency markets, but in still unforgotten national pride. People started calling it the 'Liberte'.

"What should we say it's worth?" the news anchorman asked, holding up one of the 1776 'Liberte's on national TV. Nobody knew. After that, they stopped trying to appraise it, and passed them like blessings. Folded into wedding bouquets. Slipped into boots before protest marches. Pressed into the hands of hospice patients and newborn parents alike.

Some said the image's impact would fade over time. That things would go back to the meaninglessness of politics and decrepitude of a hard scrabble. But it didn't. If anything, the image and idea of Liberte grew stronger and stronger, the more people believed in it.

And somewhere, in the hush of archival silence, an old lithograph printing press in the Philada Foundry basement still waits — waiting for that 1776 plate to be re-found and re-inked, and for a newer, better story to be told for the future, within each of us, still!

*She raises the banner, torch in hand—*
*over mountains, shining sea, and land.*
*This emblem speaks no price, no debt—*
*but what we owe each other … yet.*

# All Fly Away

"Let’s go for a drive downtown,” Malcolm had said that morning, pouring the last of the coffee into a mug. “I want to check out my new bus route. Make sure I got the feel right.”

It was his first Sunday off in three weeks—overtime shifts stacked high, each one logged toward a dream with a mortgage and a down payment. Their first house. Not much yet, but his. The kind of place with creaky floors and a porch swing and a patch of sunlight in the yard that Janine could turn into tomatoes by August.

“Well, now that you finally get a Sunday off,” Janine called through the screen door, balancing a diaper bag on one shoulder and Naomi on the other, “we’re *not* spending it watching you check the bus route. Let’s all go for a walk too!”

“Uh-huh,” she said, scooping up Eli, who had already rambled halfway to the sidewalk readying his adventure, arms out like a wind-up toy. Naomi yawned and nestled her cheek into Janine’s neck.

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“Jones Street,” Malcom said, opening the gate. “Let’s go see what all that golden light feels like when you’re actually walking in it.” So they drove downtown, and took the Jones Street alley bricked walkway, beneath the canopy of live oaks and Spanish moss.

Savannah had a way of holding time still—not like a museum, but like a grandmother’s parlor, where every scratch on the floor told a story. The bricks underfoot, worn smooth by centuries of footsteps, remembered things nobody talked about much anymore. The oaks, older than the Civil War, stretched their gnarled branches like they were trying to bless the whole street.

The houses stood proud along the walkway, porches stacked like wedding cakes, columns draped in ivy that swayed gently in the breeze. Behind white fences, azaleas erupted in pink and white, and dogwood blossoms floated down, soft-spoken.

The air hung thick with the perfume of jasmine and fresh-cut grass—that particular Savannah smell that wrapped around you like a memory you couldn’t quite place but knew was good.

Golden hour light poured through the dogwoods, catching Eli’s curls in a radiant halo, newly polished by the sun, while baby Naomi cooed from Malcolm’s arm. When Eli skidded to a stop, windmilling his arms in exaggeration, he pointed—not at a landmark or a bus sign—but at a fat bumblebee wobbling flower to flower, sugar-drunk.

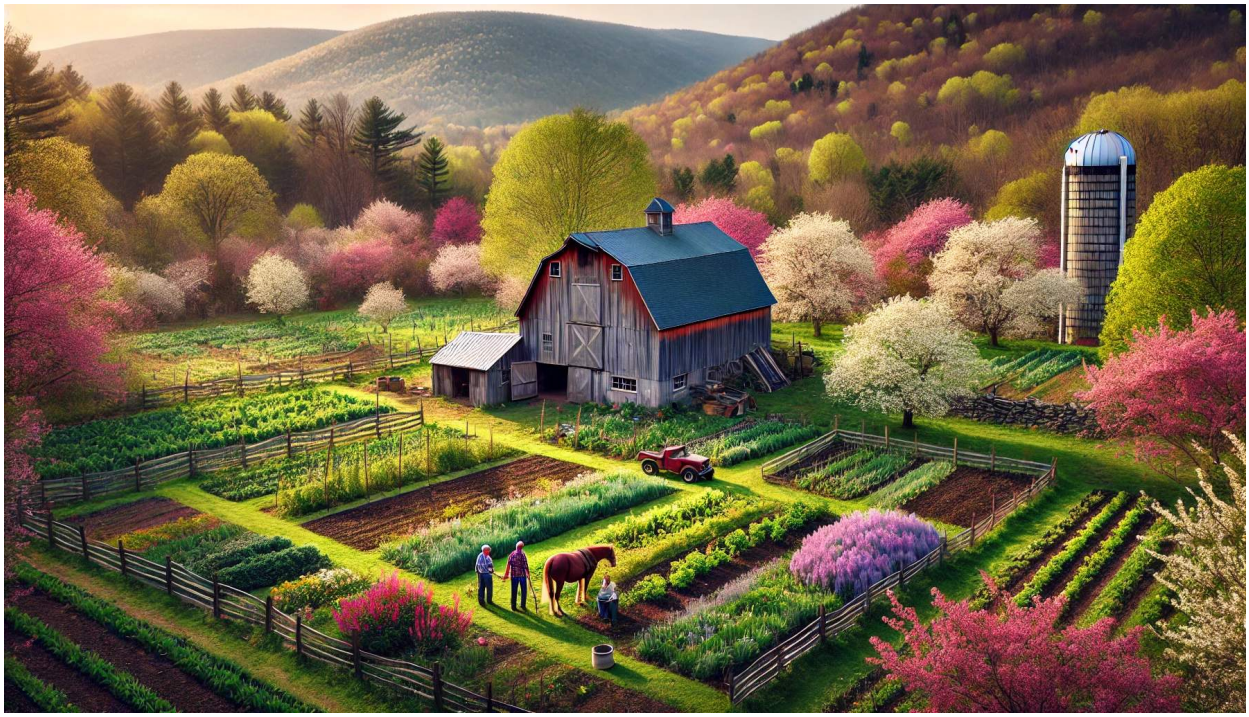
“All fly away,” Eli whispered, watching the bee hover near Naomi’s tiny fingers before drifting off into the golden sunlight.

In that small pause, everything stopped. Not out of awe exactly, but something older—a recognition. That the bee’s drifting path held no goal and needed none. That kind of joy didn’t wait for some fine morning, when this life is over.

The street shimmered amber in the low sun. Eli raced ahead, petals swirling around his feet like confetti, and Janine leaned into Malcolm’s shoulder as they walked on. The breeze caught the trees and sent another soft snow of blossoms tumbling down.

The old folks sitting out on their porches reached up, smiling, trying to catch just one.

# Nothing Gold Can Stay



May had come in like a lamb and meant to leave like one too, all softness and green-gold light. The farm lay calico-quilted under it—stone walls stitching the fields, the barn's old red boards silvered. Beyond, the woods were frothing: wild dogwood and redbud in full bloom backed against vine maples, garden lilacs so thick their sweetness near choked.

Eben wiped his forehead with his sleeve and squinted. "Peas ain't settin' in yet," he said.

His boy Josiah, twelve and already rope-muscled from hefting milk cans, jammed a fist into his hip. "Ain't? Or hain't?" He grinned, dodging the clod Eben kicked at him. Over by the stone wall, their hired man Asa dipped into his tobacco snoose pouch.

"Mind your grammar and them seeds both," Eben said, but he was pleased. The boy had his mother's tongue—quick and needling, in speaking of small things.

Lyddie emerged from the kitchen shed, her apron flapping like a surrender flag. She carried a pail of buttermilk and a loaf of brown bread. "Men-folk!" she called, sharp as a jay. You plant like Congregationalists pray—*all standing up and waiting for the Spirit!*

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Asa took a tear off the bread with a nod. “Spirit’s where the rain comes from, missus.”

“Rain my foot. It’s May and you’re grazing like livestock.” She thrust the pail at Josiah. “Here. Drink. You’re growing tall faster’n the corn.”

Eben watched her. Twenty years married and he still couldn’t say how she did it—made a scold sound like a blessing. Maybe it was how her hands, red from lye soap, lingered on the boy’s shoulder. Or how she’d left the kitchen window open so the lilac scent wove with the smell of rising dough. The farmstead was her scripture: every stone wall a verse, every furrow a hymn.

Josiah gulped the buttermilk, then wiped his mouth on his wrist. “Ma, Asa says there’s a fox got into the Lewises’ hens.”

Eben grunted. “S’pose you’ll tell us the weather next.”

“Already have. It’ll rain Saturday.” Joshiah pointed to the barn’s roof, where a pair of swallows darted in and out of the eaves. “They’re building high.”

Asa chuckled. “My grampy said that means a dry summer.”

“Your grampy also said carrying a frog cures rheumatism,” Lyddie laughed back.

The horse, old Nell, lipped at a dandelion, her tail switching flies. Beyond the wall, the woods hummed—bees in the blossoms, a wood thrush tuning up. Eben hoed at the weeds and thought how farming was mostly guessing: the last freeze, when to plant, when it might rain, at whether Josiah would go, or stay.

“Sky’s gone yellow,” Asa said. “Storm’s brewin’ sure enough.”

Eben nodded, eyes on the field. The rows weren’t harrowed. The barn still needed painting. And Josiah’d be thirteen come October. He might leave, or he might stay.

He watched his boy laugh, and something in him ached—like a promise not broken yet.

Some things you knew. The barn swallows will always come back…but would Josiah?

# Caleb’s Room

When Caleb left for college, they had all walked into town together, his suitcase banging softly against his knees. It was early August. His little sister Marie clung to his hand on the sidewalk while their mother bought his bus ticket in the station. As the bus pulled in — white paint peeling, one wiper frozen in place — he knelt to hug her. “You can have my comic books,” he whispered.

Marie didn’t answer, just nodded and rubbed her nose on his shirt. Goodbye! he waved.

The pole beans kept coming, after Caleb left. No one expected that. By September, the vines should’ve turned brittle and given up their last flowers to an early frost, but they clung to life, stubborn as anything. Marie picked the long green pods in the thinning sun, into a metal pail. Sometimes she’d look up at the hills and pretend she saw Caleb was up there in the woods, looking for deer trails.

He always let her pick the pumpkin they would carve for Halloween, and help make her costume. Every year something different, even though they lived out of town anyway.

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Caleb would crouch beside her at the porch and tie her shoelaces double-tight, then fix her little cardboard wings and face paint. He never laughed when she got the wings crooked. He just fixed it and said she looked perfect. When they walked the county road together, stopping at other homesteads, he'd carry her candy bag when it got too heavy, and he'd always trade Marie his peanut butter cups.

Glow worms by the road would light their path to the vibration of their feet walking by.

This year, she went with the neighbors. She was a moth, pale and silver, her wings stitched by Mama in the evenings. But she kept looking over her shoulder, like maybe Caleb had ducked behind a fence, waiting to jump out and say *'Boo*!'

Now it was November, and the rain had set in for good. Their porch lamps flickered in the dark. They hadn't heard from him in a couple months now. Not a letter, not a call. Mama said he was probably busy with classes, or maybe couldn't afford the stamps. Daddy said they should leave Caleb's room as it was, but Marie stood by the open door, tracing her finger across the bookshelf, feeling his presence.

The lamp hissed, steady and soft. Then Mama pulled out the old postcard set — the one with the picture of the mountains in summer — and handed it to her. "Write him," she said. "Tell him what you and the dog's been up to. Tell him it's Thanksgiving soon."

The porch light flickered again as the wind picked up. Marie asked if they should send a picture of home in a letter. Her father said, "You can describe it in your postcard."

She'd write something long, about everything she'd been doing since he left for school. She bent low, tongue peeking from the corner of her mouth, and wrote slowly.

"Dear Caleb, It is raining ag'in tonight. I miss you so fierce. When are you to home?"

She paused. "I hope Caleb remembers to use a stamp on his card," she said out loud.

Her father smiled gently and put his hand over hers. "I'm sure your brother will write."

Then her mother reached over and blew out the candle in the window.

# Whispers Of A Painted Shore

Linda Symington hadn't planned to train her replacement — *they* asked her to. "No one knows our university libraries' Dewey zones like you," the dean had said, with that flat smile that always made her feel like she was being gently erased from the org chart.

She walked the girl — bright, polite, perpetually clicking through tabs — through the stacks, in final guidance for *'keeping it together'*. "Did you know Melville's 492-page unabridged 'Moby Dick' only weighs 12 ounces!?" The girl nodded at all the right moments, then, "So… what do you do, like, when you don't have work anymore?"

Linda never called it retirement. It was more like relocation — a shifting of catalogues. On nice days, she walked the shore at low tide with a canvas satchel and a field journal.

The rhododendrons had come into bloom, loud and unapologetic. A kind of botanical confidence she admired. She'd tried to watercolor them, but the pigments never caught the incandescence, or the way their shadows curled on the dune grass. Still, the act of painting became a meditation — not about getting it right, but about paying attention.

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Her legs were no longer weak from long standing, her mind was strangely sharp. This morning, the tide had left behind tiny dramas in the sand: the squiggle of a worm trail, a half-shell cupped like a whisper, the footprint of a sandpiper already half-erased by the breeze. She bent down to trace the circle of an anemone with her finger. Somewhere in her pocket, she kept a quote from Eiseley scribbled on a scrap of journal paper:

*“We do not find it easy to stand in awe of things.”*

She was learning. Slowly. The way infants learn by listening with their whole face. The way a whirling kite tugs happy screams from little children. A mob of high-schoolers, fresh from band practice, blowing trumpets and saxophones at the bus stop.

Farther down the beach, a man stood ankle-deep in the surf, flannel sleeves rolled to the elbow. He cast long and low, like he’d been born with a rod in his hand. She paused to watch. The arc of line sang, and on the second try he pulled in a flashing greenling, surf perch maybe — slick and furious, dragged backward through the shallows. Looking left and right, he noticed her watching, then reached the edge of the waves’ detritus. He held the fish down gently there, reverently, one wide palm braced against the sand.

“Want to touch it?” he asked, without looking up.

She hesitated, then crouched beside him. The fish twitched, gills pulsing.

“It’s cold,” she said, fingertips grazing the glistening scales.

“They always are,” he said. “Right out of another world.”

Her hand hovered a second longer, and her fingers brushed his — warm, callused, and alive in a way she hadn’t expected. She blushed, laughed a little.

“Didn’t mean to—”

He smiled. “No harm.”

Linda tucked the notebook under her arm, smiled awkwardly, gave a small wave, and walked slowly home without checking her phone.

# The Skagit

The day before Darrington ‘Logging Days’ began, two men were setting spars above the river cut — lines of old Douglas fir meant to anchor the climbing contests. One was Ray Dillard, fifty-three and still strong in the back but careful now, slower than he’d admit. The other was his nephew, Buck, just turned nineteen and full of that foolish courage you can’t teach and don’t want to lose.

They had the rigging almost done when Ray caught a soft spot — rot beneath the bark like a lie under a handshake. He slipped but didn’t fall, thanks to Buck’s fast tie-off and a rope that held. Still, the silence afterward was heavier than the near-miss. The forest around them had gone still, watching maybe, or remembering. Ray wiped his brow, “Guess that one don’t want to be felled.” Buck didn’t laugh. They left that spar standing, like a grave they wouldn’t mark.

By the time the ‘Logging Days’ crowds gathered, you could feel that moment in the dust and diesel. There was carnival in the air — kettle corn, country music, a raffle for a side-by-side and a load of people. Kids ran with pinwheels painted red, white and blue,

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and a troupe of Girl Scouts sold sugar cookies. But some of the old-timers, they walked quieter. They looked up at the new spar poles — proud.

That afternoon, a woman (a *woman!*) from Granite Falls rang the bell first try, climbing with a fluid grace that made the crowd roar. It was a clean run — all heel and hand — and she smiled like she'd done it in her sleep. Back behind the bleachers, Ray watched with his arm in a sling and his jaw tight. Buck stood beside him, one hand on the old man's shoulder, eyes fixed on the spar they hadn't climbed.

Later, after the heat broke and the sun curled low behind Whitehorse Mountain, the Brewitts brought folding chairs to the fairway. Horace sat slow, knees cracking, and watched the sawdust drift like ash over the showgrounds. "Used to be you could hear the old growth giants falling from town," he said, half to himself. "Now all you hear is wind."

His granddaughter spun through the dusk with a blue ribbon pinned to her chest and a stick of pink cotton-candy floss big as her face. Horace looked at her like he was looking two generations deep — the girl, the trees, the weight of what had been felled and what still stood. The mountains, pale with last light, said nothing.

Her name was Willa, and to her, the whole thing felt like a fairy tale made of flannel and sweat. Men ran up trees like squirrels. Axes flew. The crowd whooped like thunder. She licked pink cotton-candy from her knuckles and leaned in close to Horace, teasing.

"Did you ever climb one, Grampa? Were you *scared*?" she laughed mischievously.

"Once," he said, eyes on the spar. "It was a lot taller than it looks." He paused. "I was nineteen, then, Willa. You don't get scared at nineteen. We were brave, then we learned the difference between brave and stupid."

*The mountains have seen it all —*
*the axes, the saws, the old rhythms,*
*the men who cleared the way.*
*And still, we climb the spars in sport.*
*Still, we cheer. Still, we remember.*
*And still, the ghosts lean back and smile.*

# Aunt Mique Was Waiting

They left Chattanooga before dawn, a thermos of chicory coffee riding shotgun and boiled eggs rolling loose in a bag of oranges on the backseat. The boy counted every Waffle House they passed — seventeen before they hit the Florida line — while his little sister practiced spelling “alligators” on the fogged-up glass. By the time they crossed the causeway into Boca Grande, the sun had dropped like a coin in a vending machine behind the palmettos, and the sky was the pink of melted sherbet.

Aunt Mique was waiting barefoot on the porch, wiping her hands on a flour-dusted apron and waving like she was fanning off smoke. “Chicken dinner!” she hollered, then bent to kiss their heads, one by one. Colton, half-hungry, half-wired from the drive, whispered, “Yeah, KFC!” Mique gave him ‘that look’. “Let’s go get the chicken, then!”

She marched Colton out behind the hibiscus hedge, handed him a hatchet with a handle worn smooth by weather and use. The coop stank of feathers and must, and every bird turned to stare like a witness. “Don’t chop my hand!” she warned, guiding his grip. He blinked. The world narrowed. The chicken’s neck was across the block. Then—*whack!*

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Except the chicken didn't die. It bolted — headless — downhill into the little pond where it floated, tragic, then drowned. Colton dropped the hatchet, face white, about to puke. Aunt Mique clucked her tongue. "Well OK," she said. "Guess we'll have burgers instead."

He did have a knack for spotting conches before anyone — knee-deep in the tide pools, his hat crooked, a silent finger pointing to a pearled shadow half-buried in wet sand. She followed him barefoot, holding a battered enamel bucket, laughing when the wind flipped her braid like a kite tail. They'd go back through the mangrove shallows, air thick with hum and salt, until the house came into view: pink stucco faded soft as a seashell.

Aunt Mique had a knife for every purpose. One for conch, one for fish, one for palm heart — and she sang when she cooked, old ranchera songs passed down through too many hands to trace. The yellowtail he caught that day — all muscle and shimmer — stretched the length of the icebox. It became the centerpiece of dinner, flaked and tender, steaming beside foil-wrapped potatoes and collards wilted in bacon.

Colton sat proud and sun-pinked, passing platters while his grandfather raised a glass of lime soda and said, "That's a fisherman, like his father." Dayton grinned and leaned back, eyes gleaming with the memory of long-ago dawns in a cedar skiff on Lake Temagami, reeling in walleye. He held their daughter Emery by his knee, describing. "We froze our fingers off," he said, "but we always came back with fish for dinner."

They laughed, clinked glasses, told a few family stories of past Christmases and some tall tales too, once or twice. That night was warm with praise — a kind of inner sun itself.

Mique found Colton lying face-down in his bed, the heat rising off his shoulders like steam from a sun-baked pudding. The sun had burnt him too long, too hard. He could barely breathe from the pain. She went out and came back with ice cubes, witch hazel and a damp cotton sheet, cooling his back in long, unhurried strokes.

In the dim hallway, Dayton warned Emery about sunstroke and recklessness. Colton drifted off to sleep, the scent of the witch hazel and soap in the air, dreaming of the sea — and how sometimes, in a world filled with love, even the stars seemed to burn.

# No One’s Looking for Us

They left the festival still buzzing with noise in their bones — the kind of noise that clings long after the music stops. Hannah’s calves were streaked with red clay from dancing barefoot in the dust pit by the main stage, and Elan’s shirt smelled like warm hops and sunblock and the after-sweat of strangers. “Sunshine and Whiskey” was still stuck in her head. The chorus felt stitched into her throat.

Neither of them wanted to go back to town and to their working lives just yet. The thought of his distant construction jobsite commutes and her bookkeeping night shifts made him veer the pickup off the freeway  without asking. Hannah didn’t mind. She leaned out the window and let the wind comb through her curls.

She was a bookkeeper at a small dental office. He wired up rural solar rigs for a rotating crew. They’d met at a Christmas party, made out under the coats, and since then had become each other’s occasional weekends — the kind you mark off in Sharpie and look forward to like a secret. The festival was their summer plan. Three months of texts and

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playlists and map-scribbling  to be here, caught between Mt. Hood's pale gleam and the bass drop of the biggest sound stage in Eastern Oregon. *What a music festival!*

After, they found the old house off a macadam gravel road, half-collapsed barn tilting like a question. The porch sagged, and dry cheatgrass danced through the window frames. Hannah hopped out of the Ranger 4x, "Let's check it out!"

Fixing the place up started as a joke. Elan said, "We could wire it offgrid," and Hannah said, "Only if we get a dog," and by the time the sun was low in the sky, they'd fixed up an old spring bed frame and scrubbed a spot for a coil rug they found rolled up, to sit on.

She found a hand-crank record player and a box of old 78s in the attic: Mahalia Jackson, Patsy Cline, some warped but the sound ghostly beautiful. At night, they drank sauterne box-wine from mismatched Kerr jars and lay on the roof, staring up into the sky like it was a promise. The Milky Way wheeled slow as scripture above, lighting their smiles.

They cooked trout from the stream with rosemary Hannah found in the abandoned garden out back. She sang in the evenings — low, strange, half-mountain, half-memory — sometimes slipping into full doo-wop renditions of Sonny & Cher, or giggling halfway through a Tammy Wynette line. Elan joined in when he could keep up, laughing, off-key.

Hannah smiled, "It's like we slipped out of time somehow. Like no one's looking for us."

Elan sighed, "Maybe we don't have to go back. I don't want to, do you?"

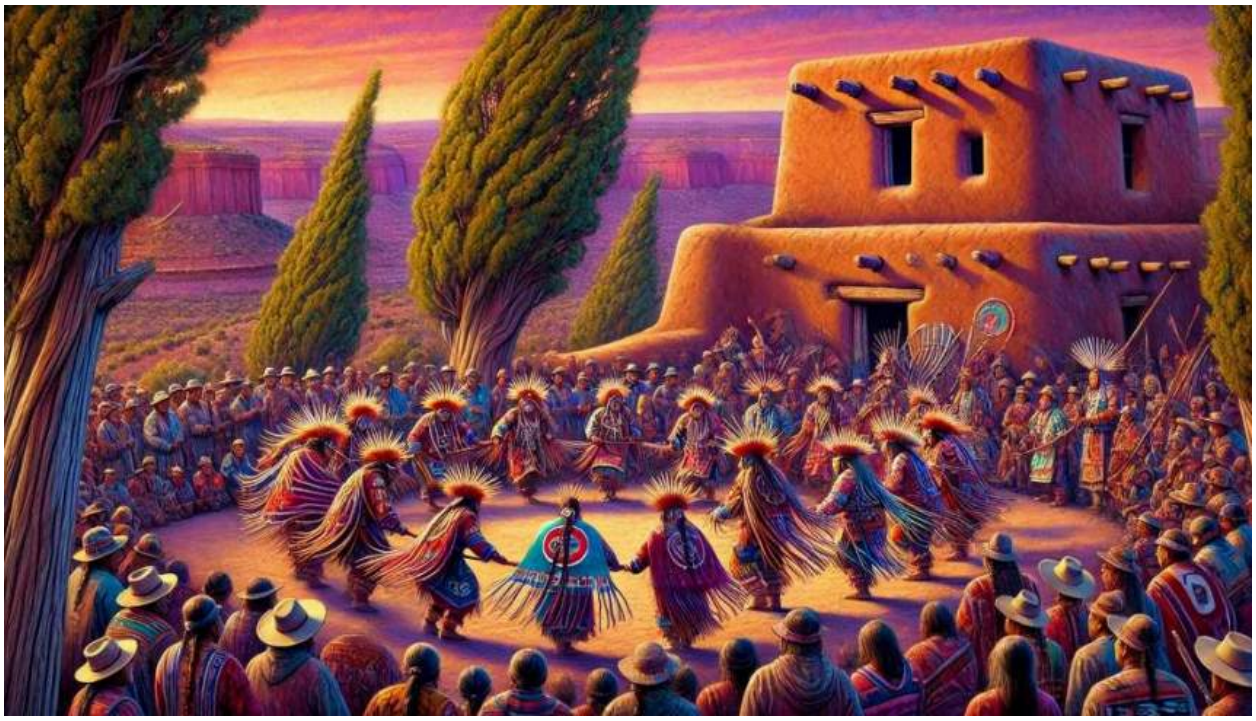
"You say that like we're fugitives. We have our jobs, remember? Rent? Hello?"

"I remember. I also remember your happy shout when you found those old 78's!"

"It felt like magic. Our inheritance."

So, nothing was official. No declarations. No timelines. This moment — time stitched gently to simple labor, easy laughter, to the dusty smell of pine needles and old wood and their two bodies nestled together. The festival music had ended, but something better remained: the hush between heart beats, and rediscovery of their inner voices.

# Smoke, Dust, and Heartbeat



Jim Walpert had come West for his lungs, though he never said it out loud. The doctors had pressed a thumb to his chest and told him to go where the sky was dry and the light had no patience for dampness.

He made it as far as Keams Canyon, then beyond, trailing mule carts and trading parties up into lands that didn't want him but tolerated him, the way a cottonwood tolerates barbed wire caught in its bark.

The trading post was run by a man named Rowe, who never asked a question twice. In the spring of 1912, they took to carting barrels of water up from the valley, where the Navajo had well oases that shimmered like secrets. Life below was always dust and motion—goat herders, prospectors, wind, the endless fuss of necessity.

But above, on the mesa, the Hopi still moved like brushstrokes from another century. They walked with something the man would later try to name—not pride, not silence, but a kind of steadiness. As if they had already survived what hadn’t happened yet.

Jim was there, near Walpi, when the drums started. A rhythm, steady and low.

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Then figures, painted and adorned, appeared on the dusty plaza—men, yes, but transformed by time, or memory, or meaning. Their bodies were bare from the waist up, faces painted black with white foreheads, adorned with eagle feathers and turquoise necklaces. They wore dark kilts with colorful bands and rain sashes hanging from their waists. Tortoiseshell rattles were fastened behind their knees, and they moved with a grace that mimicked the serpents they held.

He did not understand the dance. He did not need to. When a frontier biographer standing close by to him lifted his sketching canvas, a Hopi boy no older than twelve stepped forward and shook his head gently, as if to say: not for this, not for you.

So Jim stood in the shadow of an ancient juniper, and let the ceremony take him.

The movement was not for spectacle. It was something far older. The dancers, of the Snake and Antelope clans, had spent days gathering snakes—rattlesnakes, bull snakes, garter snakes—handling them with reverence. During the dance, they held the live snakes in their hands and mouths, believing them to be messengers to the underworld, carrying prayers for rain and fertility.

The wind lifted the hem of his coat, and he felt the coolness of being exactly where he was, with no part of himself being any elsewhere.

That night Jim didn't sleep, not well. He dreamed of ladders in the sky and snakes gliding across floors made of dust. In the morning, he took his mule and rode back down into the valley. He never returned to the mesa. It was not his place to be.

Years later, in a letter home, he would write only: "There is a silence up there, you can hear your heart beating in your chest."

*We do not name the dance.*
*We name the watching.*
*Smoke, dust, and heartbeat—*
*the land remembers more than we ask.*
*A circle forms.*
*A silence holds.*

# The Last Laugh Must Be Taught

In the highlands of Bali, where the air grows sweet with cardamom and cloves, the village of Penglipuran rests like a whispered prayer. Everything breathes bamboo here—gates, kitchens, rooftops layered in fivefold symmetry, walls woven in soft latticework to catch the light. The breeze stirs gently through the towering groves, and the bamboo clicks and clacks like wind chimes left by ancestors.

Each yard, or *pekarangan*, carries its own quiet rhythm: chickens rustling in their bushes, incense curling from the family temple, and the soft hush of sandals on stone. Sacredness lives not in grandeur but in orientation—toward the mountain, always the mountain—and the gods who dwell there in folded smoke and memory.

Now, seated outside the bamboo-walled compound under the shade of a *frangipani* tree, the old man reached again for the greasepaint. Not much—just a thumbprint of red on the boy's cheek, a dot of white above the brow. Next to him, Ni Wayan, his wife of fifty years, ran a fine brush over their granddaughter's eyelids, tracing the ancestral curl of the *legong* eye. Then the grandchildren began to paint their grandparents' faces.

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They had danced their entire lives—one in the heavy robes of court laughter, the other in trance-soaked silks. They said nothing, but their hands moved like scripture. The children would learn this not from words, but by echo. They would become living shadows of their elders, just as their elders had once mirrored gods.

There had been a time—before tourist buses and wedding drones—when Ketut Lawak had been a *dalang* in the Wayang Wong. The human form of the puppet stage: stylized movement, precise eyes, the drama of limbs speaking epics. Not stories, but missions.

He had played Dasamuka once—the ten-headed king of demons. Not as villain, but as warning: the danger of forgetting which voice is yours. In Wayang Wong, even demons are remembered, because all stories are inherited, even the ones we regret.

A temple stood not far from the village, along the north road where mist gathers like lost breath. Pura Melanting—temple to the goddess of prosperity. But what was prosperity, truly? Not the coins in a tourist's palm, not the imported lace of a bride's veil. Here, prosperity meant that the breath of an ancestor could still be felt in the performance. That memory was not just archived, but enacted. That forgetting was not progress.

The grandchildren giggled, then stood to perform. The boy exaggerated a stumble. The girl bowed with grave, exaggerated grace, then curled her hands in Javan style, gliding across the floor, letting her head bobble and her eyes glare left and right as she'd seen.

Ni Wayan and Ketut Lawak, the masters of shadow and silence, laughed because the grandchildren's act was imperfect. That was the first lesson. You learn with your errors, not in spite of them, anyway perfection is in the heart of that performance, the magic. And when the children bowed, unprompted, the old man nodded solemnly.

Later, as dusk fell and the incense curled like forgotten music, the grandchildren home with their parents, the two elders sat in silence. They watched the shadows stretch long against the compound wall, and remembered their own first efforts to learn tradition.

The last laugh must be taught.

Then it must be remembered.

# Kanchipuram

In the eastern quarter of Kanchipuram, near the edge of the dry river that once fed the dye vats, there sits a man who no longer answers to his name. They call him the Keeper of Silence, though none remember when he stopped speaking.

But once, long ago, he was Govindan of Muthur village—a wiry boy with ink-stained fingers and a stubborn streak, born to a farmer with too many mouths to feed. At seventeen, he was married to Anjali, who brought with her a brass pot, a bolt of turmeric silk, and a quiet intelligence that saw through pretense. Together, they moved north to Ahmedabad, where the trade was better and the air drier, and opened a textile stall.

Anjali had a smile like cool rain and managed the house with a silent genius—seven children, none of them fools, each eager to rise higher than their station. In time, they did. Calcutta, Bombay, Madras—one by one they drifted away, like hash-scribbled leaves torn from an old ledger.

Their children—Ravi, Lata, Mohan, Pranav, twins Sanjay and Sarita, and the youngest, little Gita—used to sleep side by side like spoons in a drawer. The eldest once asked if

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rich men wore softer shirts. The youngest once cried when her mother tore the bread unevenly, saying, “Amma, who gets the bigger half?” These were the things he kept in his heart, even after their visits home and apology letters stopped.

Anjali gave everything to help them fly away, and when she collapsed from the giving, no doctor could reverse it. Govindar, once called brilliant for his wealth, grew smaller with her absence. The shop closed. The shutters collected dust. The great bales of silk were sold. Years passed. The city changed. The children wrote less often. Then forgot to.

Now a lean and saffron figure, he gave his name to the river and asked nothing in return.

The temple elephants pass him each morning now and sway their heads, as if in salute. The rickshaw drivers take care not to block the sun where he sits, cross-legged beside the old cartwheel shrine.

He was not born holy, though the tourists might think so. Once, he sold fine textiles, and his family dined from brass dishes polished with pride. Now…this. Samsara.

He sits in a cloak faded by wind and prayer. Not begging. Not preaching. Simply there. A witness to temple bells, to torn sandals, to the hush that follows incense. Those who pass by too quickly think him gone mad from staring at the sun. The wiser ones offer water. And the meek say nothing at all. They know.

Because silence, in this land, is not emptiness.

It is inheritance.

*Hari om tat sat*

हरि ॐ तत् सत्

*Hari om tat sat*

हरि ॐ तत् सत्

# Delectation of Tomatoes

Janey said it was too hot for overalls, the kind with the wide brass buttons and a patch where her mother had stitched up the knee with thread and calico. She liked how they made her feel, but wouldn't wear them. Not today. She said it out loud—*too hot*—and Arnie laughed, enough to make her say it twice more.

Their grandmother, who insisted they call her *Nana*, squatted low in the tomato rows. Her back was straight like she'd always been young and never would be old, just this

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eternal shape gardening in the dirt. She picked without looking, thumb pressing the tomatoes, wrist flicking the stem like a priest absolving sin.

“These are for market day,” she said, not looking up. “Don’t squeeze them. They bruise.”

Arnie was crouched next to her, his hands fast and clumsy, in short-sleeves and shorts. He’d grown fast this spring, long and knobby like the beanpoles in the other row. Jane couldn’t decide if he looked like a soldier or a scarecrow. His freckled nose had peeled once already, and Nana kept slapping sun lotion on it like paint on a picket fence.

“I bet they don’t even get these in town,” Arnie said, tossing one into the basket, proud of the size and heft. “Real tomatoes. Probably eat imported greenhouse canners.”

Nana plucked one gently and held it up to the sun. It glowed like a lantern, veined and alive. She imagined it warm in a buyer’s hand. Imagined him thinking of a farm, of rich soil, of her. She didn’t know any city folk.

But she wrote market day journals anyway, unsigned, tucked into the folds of her diary, imagining how she’d sound if someone read her stuff.

“You dreaming again, June-bug?” Nana said, her voice like lemon steeped in honey.

Janey smiled, but only on one side of her mouth. “This one’s green.”

Nana wiped her hands on her apron and straightened, her knees cracking like twigs. “That’s how you know they’re not ready. The red ones, the ripest, always carry the most flavor. And the most memory of the sun and earth.”

Arnie made a goofy face. “What does memory taste like, Nana?”

Nana kept moving down the row, her shadow longer now, curling across the roots. Janey looked at the green tomato in her hand, then dropped it on the ground.

Later, when the sun was low and the canning jars lined the kitchen sill like soldiers of their own kind, Arnie’d pushed a wide tomato wedge into his mouth, for the answer to his question. It droozled down his chin. ‘M’mm, m’mm’, he gulped, laughing.

# Kinaaldá

Long before the first footfalls marked the pathways of Dinétah, the Holy People spoke of a child born from the very mists that crown Gobernador Knob. First Man and First Woman, tending this high land, heard a cry echoing through dawn's gray veil. They followed its call to the clouds, and there, folded into the whispering haze, lay a baby girl.

Naming her Changing Woman—Asdzaan Nádleehí—they watched in wonder as she grew not by seasons, but by days. Each sunrise brought another year of life, so that at the turn of twelve dawns, she stood at the brink of womanhood, feet firm in sacred earth.

The Holy People gathered then to mark this miracle. First Woman molded her into shape upon a buckskin laid like altar cloth. Her hair was brushed back and bound with buckskin cords, her moccasins beaded in white shell, skirt and leggings graced with fringe. Guided by gentle hands, she ground corn into dough, baked a cake whose first slice—the "heart"—was offered to the Sun, source of light and life. At dawn's first breath, she performed the last ceremony, tracing the path of her becoming.

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In gratitude, Changing Woman held two ceremonies for herself and passed two forward to all who would follow. Thus, each Navajo girl, when her body's first bloom arrives, steps into a ritual as ancient as the land—cementing her place among ancestors, tracing the footsteps of those who shaped her spirit.

Makawee had been taught this tradition by her mother and grandmother. Now she sat in silence, not because she lacked words, but because the moment was already speaking. The wind moved through the sagebrush in long, fluent sentences. Her skirt, heavy with color and memory, brushed against the ancient bark of the downed cypress, and the boy beside her mirrored her stillness, as if he, too, knew the weight of ceremony.

Today was her fourth day. The last run eastward had already happened before the light changed. Her legs still held the rhythm of it. She had run as they told her — into the morning, into the becoming. The belt cinched at her waist, the turquoise at her wrist, the yucca-scented strands of hair tied back — these were not ornaments. They were reminders. Of corn cake rising in the hearth. Of her mother's hands shaping her future.

Of the Holy People watching without words.

The boy, her young brother, asked no questions. He was younger, and yet part of her story now. He would remember this version of her — not the child Makawee had been, but the woman beginning to form. In his mind, she would always be dressed like this, in this moment, wearing a stillness that smelled of woodsmoke and soon monsoon rain.

And in hers, he was the one who had listened while she said nothing.

*She watched him,*
*not for answers,*
*but for the shape of the wind.*
*The earth below them cracked*
*like old stories—*
*still breathing,*
*still waiting to be heard.*

# A Good Run

Turner had rehearsed his spiel: the profit margins, market share, ‘customer satisfaction’ versus quarterly sales expectations. But now, twig in hand, suit just a shade too big, he felt like he was miming a part that someone else had lived, as he pitched his uncle Bertrand, the quintessential salesman everyone knew as ‘Burt’.

“How’s your mom?” the old man asked, putting his hand on Turner’s shoulder.

“She’s good,” the boy said quickly, then added, “Still says she’s not worried, but she is.”

Burt, relaxed but attentive in the afternoon’s slanting light, pushed the plum branch he had used as a cane into the grass, and sat forward on the bench. Turner’s tie had gone a little loose in the heat. He tightened it again out of habit, then noticed his uncle had loosened his own tie as he sat, hooking one finger over the knot.

His uncle chuckled. “She always worried. About you, about me. Thought I’d die in Dayton selling vacuums door-to-door.” He leaned back again, watching the fireflies blink open. “But look—we’re still here. You got a real suit and I got a titanium hip.”

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Turner laughed, a small one, then tried out a new sales pitch on his attentive uncle.

“You know,” Burt advised, “sales is a little like Plato’s Cave. You project a thing bright enough, and the customer sees a version of themselves dancing on the wall. You’re not selling the thing—you’re selling their belief in the *feeling* of them already having it.”

Turner shifted the twig in his hand, suddenly unsure what he’d meant to do with it.

“I believe in the feeling they give me when they sign the purchase order,” Burt laughed, “and that’s been enough for me!” “Anyway,” he added, standing up with a soft groan, “*nothing is sadder than a salesman who believes in his own pitch*.”

Turner looked up, blinking, caught. “Is that what I sounded like, like a street hawker?” A pause. He scuffed the grass with his shoe, then: “Maybe I should’ve been an artist.”

“You tell me,” his uncle brushed a beetle from his cuff. “Was this *your* pitch, Turner? Or is this what they gave you to memorize? Are you a real player? Where were *you* in all that?” Insects stitched the afternoon air like lazy comets. Turner stood there with no answer. “Well,” Burt said at last, “even artists market their product too. You’ll have to sell yourself, one way or the other. But at least you’d know it’s your own illusion.”

Turner didn’t smile, but something loosened in his chest a bit. He could sell *himself!*

The garden light mellowed, only the hush of early evening like a breath softly exhaled. Burt lit a cigar, then waved Turner off with a grin and a wink that said more than his advice ever could. “Well, nephew, stay clean and *good luck!”*

On the walk home, Turner passed his reflection in darkened windows — seen first as a man in a suit, then re-imagined again as a man with an artist's smock. Both stared back at him, but neither spoke. Life, he guessed, wasn’t about choosing wealth over struggle. It was about knowing which silence that you could live with, and which one, when it finally did speak, you would wave to and run towards.

Turner realized that he was still holding the pitch twig in his hand, and tossed it into a sidewalk trash bin.

# Tsé na'ii (Three Figures)

The woman didn’t ask because she expected an answer. She asked because she remembered. There had been a time — not long ago — when brown boys walked dusty roads with songs on their lips, not just to stay warm.

Now, here they were. The three. Folded into concrete, shadows pooled beneath them.

“I asked you where’s your mom,” she said again. Not harder. Just clearer.

The tallest boy blinked once, slowly. “She went to find water,” he said.

She nodded. “How long ago?”

He didn’t answer. He didn’t know. In the desert heat and haze, there is no ‘time’.

The sun lowered itself into the western haze. Her knees ached from squatting too long in ceremony last week, her turquoise rings still reminded her of  it. She rose slightly now and adjusted the skirt across her thighs. Not quite standing, squatting on a milk crate.

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“And where do you sleep, how do you eat?”

He shifted. The younger two waited behind him like half-fledged songbirds.

“We go to the church sometimes,” he said. “The Calvary Pantry one. They got trays with milk. But we don’t sleep there,” he added, after a pause. “Then you gotta stay all night with the other folks, and some yell in their sleep. Then you can’t sleep anymore.”

The woman’s chest tightened. “What’s your name?”

“Bidziil,” he said after a pause. “That’s what she calls me. My mom. Sometimes Bidzi.”

“How long you been watching out for them?” she asked, nodding at the two boys.

“Since Sells,” Bidzi said. “We’re Tohono O’odham, ‘least my Dad was.”

The youngest one, maybe seven or eight, was mouthing lyrics to something soundless. The other boy kept one hand on his brother’s shoulder, both of them in worn jeans.

She pulled something from her bag — a flat square of fry bread wrapped in wax paper. “This was meant for someone else. But it’s still warm.”

They didn’t move, but she could see their hunger. Frozen like feral street kids.

“I don’t take pictures. I don’t post online. I’m not that kind of person.”

Bidz looked at her. Really looked. “So you Navajo, or what?”

“Half,” she said. “But I still visit the rez.”

He hesitated, then took the fry bread and split it into thirds with his brothers.

“There’s a shelter east of here. Outreach, not church,” she said. “I’ll walk you there. They’ll put you in touch with your tribe, and settle you in, until you can return.”

*who taught you stillness, little hawks—*
*the neon nests are broken*
*and the desert speaks in hunger.*

# Somebody's Tuesday

The room was quiet but not still—like the hush right after a door slams, when nobody's decided yet who should speak first. The boys on the floor were lost in their own rhythm, the way children know how to disappear inside a game when the grown-up world gets too loud. They weren't talking, but their small hands moved—cars, blocks, a broken crayon—and that movement was its own kind of music.

The officer stood by the door like he didn't want to be there, like maybe he'd been here before. Maybe not this apartment, but this exact silence. He had that look—the one that says, I know how this ends but I'm still sorry it's me who has to say it.

Daddy sat low in the chair, knees apart, hands folded tight, his Sunday shoes still polished from the wedding. You could tell he hadn't meant to sit like that. It just happened. The way sorrow sits on you without asking.

But the boys keep playing. Daddy keeps sitting. The officer leaves without another word.

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She had come in that morning still wearing her blush—the wedding had been beautiful, in its own messy way. The choir had sung "*His Eye Are on the Sparrow"* like they were trying to lift someone all the way home. Her baby girl, seventeen and glowing, in a dress they'd paid too much for. The groom had stood crooked at the altar, eyes flicking side to side like maybe the back door was more tempting than vows. Still, they'd said 'I do.'

After the rice, the church bells, after the benediction, Mama had pulled him aside. She wasn't quiet. She wasn't calm. "You keep your name clean," she said. "Don't you bring no shame to this family!"

And then, he just had to front! "Whatever…." with a snicker too! Boy be *trippin'!!*

Lord help her, Mama hauled off and smacked him, so hard! Right there on the sidewalk in front of the church, knocked him to his knees in front of God and everybody.

So now the church is talking. The daughter's gone off with her boy-man husband. And Mama—who spent her whole life trying to build something clean in a world that never gave her soap—was in the back of a cruiser when her boys came home.

Now it's Tuesday. The fridge is half-empty. The apartment smells like morning and laundry soap and silence. The silence that waits for somebody to say it's going to be alright, even if it ain't. Ain't nobody knows when she's coming home. Booked by shift change—fingerprinted, questioned, locked in a cell that smells like bleach and nerves. The arraignment judge might not even look up when he sets bond, fast as a rubber stamp. If she's lucky, the charge will read "disturbing the peace." If not, "assault."

Either way, the bail's more than Mama has. The girls who sings soprano in the choir will pass a basket for her, and some of the elders in assembly might shake their heads, but still give. If the money comes, it'll take all day to post. And when they finally let her out, it won't be into sunlight but into a dark parking lot, with no coat and no ride.

And somewhere, in a church still warm from Sunday, a choir rehearses the old song:

*"I Sing Because I'm Happy…"*

# The Inheritance of Misery

Curtis had kissed his daughters on the head that morning, one with pancakes in her mouth, the other still tangled in sleep. The kitchen smelled like bacon and coffee. His wife hummed some half-remembered tune while packing lunches. Outside, the sky was that clean spring blue that made everything seem possible. The school bus rumbled up. His youngest shouted “Love you!” — echoing her mother — and then they were gone.

The drive to the office took twenty minutes, long enough for the day’s weight to settle on his shoulders. By the time he parked in the gravel lot, the sun had begun its climb up.

The woman was there, waiting at the entry like a question nobody wanted to ask. She didn’t pace. Didn’t smoke. Just sat, arms around her child like armor, his small face tucked so tight into her that he could’ve been part of her breath.

Curtis held the office door. She didn’t thank him. Not rudely — as if any ritual had been removed from her language. It was the kind of place that took the color out of people. Gray chairs scuffing gray tiles. Dishwater walls that caught echoes of every tired heel.

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The waiting room clock that didn't tick, just hummed, like it knew time wasn't moving for anyone in here, anyway.

The mother sat with her coat still on, clutching the little boy too tightly for it to be warm and casual. He was four, maybe five—but small in the way children get when their world starts shrinking. He pressed his face into the place between her ribs and her heart, and didn't move. She didn't bounce her leg. Didn't check the clock. The waiting room wasn't made for breathing. Just silence.

Curtis behind the desk had the look of someone who used to care too much and now didn't know where to put it. He held a manila folder thick with names and numbers and the long trail of somebody's undoing. She didn't know what had happened to the boy's father, only that he was *gone*. Could've left, run. Could be somewhere he can't get out of.

There were boxes to check. Interviews to schedule. A ride to arrange. He cleared his throat and tried to make eye contact, but the mother never looked. She wasn't angry. Just already somewhere else.

She had waited before, in other offices. For paychecks that never came. For calls that didn't ring. Men who made promises on Fridays, disappeared by Sunday morning. But this time was different. She wasn't waiting for *him*. She was waiting to get on with it.

Outside, a steady breeze was brittle with cold. Spring had come to other neighborhoods, but not this one. Inside, the ceiling lights flickered like they were tired too. The boy's feet didn't touch the ground, and he didn't swing them.

"Do you have anyone to stay with?" Curtis asked.

She looked past him, like the answer was hiding on the far wall.

"My mama's got a couch," she said finally. "And a little time."

That was all. A couch. A little time.

And the boy, quiet as a held breath.

# The Island That Waits For Man

The stones remember when they were fire.

They lie now in quiet surrender along the shore, black and glistening, rounded by the patient teeth of the tide. Each one holds the memory of eruption—the hiss of molten rock meeting saltwater, the way the earth once coughed them up, like cinders from an ancient god's throat.

The Elbow Room smelled of diesel, sweat, and the ghost of fall's king crab season, now over. The bar's windows were fogged with the breath of men who'd fought the Bering Sea and lost as often as they'd won.

"Ain't on no chart," muttered Pete Kovalik, hands a map of old scars. "But the Nunavut boys swear it's real. Place where the walrus crawl up to die. The crows pick 'em clean."

"Walrus tusks," said the greenhorn, Jasper, still yet with the arrogance of someone who hasn't had a boat sink out from under him. "Fossil ivory, they were talkin' in the Luna

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Sea. Burnt as oil, hard as steel. Tusks buryin' themselves in the shallows like some kinda seed bank for the Devil."

Bill Harkin snorted into his beer. "You ever seen a walrus die, boy? They cry like babies. They lived out in a wilderness un-imagined by Man, and don't want to pass on into the darkness and void. Now reckon thousands of 'em, their tusks lying fossilized under the sand. That island'll have a voice that's singin' dirges to treasures lost."

They'd all heard the stories, the finding of it, but still no one knew where it was found:

*Storm King*, a 'Zodiac-fleet' crab boat out of Ballard, had limped back to port with only the skipper. His crew? "Gone ashore diggin'," he'd mumbled, before his hands started shaking apart like a bad-riveted machine.

A Yupik hunter swore he'd found a fossil tusk carved with alien scrimshaw markings "older than the ice," in no ways known. He drowned in calm seas three days later, skiff found empty and full of black sand. That kind of thing doesn't happen in summer.

Kovalik leaned in. "Who's gonna go with me? We're heading to the Pribilof's at dawn to look. Coast Guard says there's no reports of sea ice, and temperature's above freezing."

The men got quiet. The kind of quiet that means they're counting the cost. They'd been heeled 25-degrees, pounding inch-thick ice with baseball bats, to keep from capsizing. *'Mayday! Mayday!'* They'd all heard it on the radio. Then silence. That's what gets you. You knew someone you probably drank with was freezing to death in black seas.

Around them the bar was in an uproar, crowded with angry fishermen. *Closing time!* The room started to clear. Outside in the snow, a fist fight brawl had broken out.

Harkin spoke. "Ain't about findin' it. An' it ain't about diggin' it." He lifted his glass to the bar door, as a wild gust blew it open, to where harbor lights blurred like drowned stars. "*It's about gettin' it back.*"

They drank up then, each tasting salt and diesel, the copper tang of their last night ashore, then back out to sea. "Rocking and rolling!' *Mayday! Mayday! Mayday!* The north wind picked up, hard, howling through the rigging of boats in the harbor.

Somewhere beyond the black horizon of Unalaska, an epic snow squall was building.

# Vashtëmi

The trees had grown wild, its roots older than the fence, older than the house in the distance with its proud blue shutters and limestone lintels. They said the land once belonged to the church, then to the Party, and now to someone in Tirana who never came. The trees remained. And so did the peasants who tended the manor.

The path through Vashtëmi’s hills was mostly for goats now, or old men with long memories and longer staffs. Grandfather Beni was both. He sat on his folding canvas frame in the warm dust beside the boy, squinting up into the August haze. His hands were knotted like the plum tree's trunk, and the bamboo pole that he carried, they would use for walnuts again next month.

“Point, Luan!” he said, for his vision was failing.

The boy eagerly pointed and shouted when the pole drew close. His voice still hadn’t cracked, but his bones were growing fast. Shirt frayed at the collar. Coveralls patched with twine. He was barefoot, because his shoes were for market days.

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They worked quietly. No need for talk when the aim was shared. Plums fell in heavy thuds to the grass-grown dusty track, then into their big wicker basket. Bees hovered and spun through the air, drunk on sugar from the plums that had split open.

The sun struck every shadow gold.

That manor house further down the lane—its upstairs empty, its attic forgotten—stood watching, as it always had. It belonged to a man with accounts in Zurich and leather shoes that cost more than a season's worth of feed grain. He didn't know the way the hill smelled when the figs bloomed, or how to prune a tree so it bore twice as long. He owned the house, and its grounds, but never visited.

Beni and Luan stole nothing. Branches reached past the fence over the wheel-waffled farm track. The fruit that fell beyond the fence was no one's but the earth's, and would have rotted in neglect.

Still, when they left, they did not linger. The boy and grandfather together heaved the heavy baskets onto their push cart, wincing from the weight. Grandmother would boil the fruit with sugar, lemon peel and clove, some dried apple peels for pectin, then ladle jam into old jars, and sell to tourists with wide eyes and fat purses. With that money, they'd buy lentils and flour. Barley for the animals. Salt and vinegar for pickles.

Luan turned to look back, but Beni tapped his shoulder and shook his head. "Don't, Luan. Don't ever look back!"

Halfway down the hill, baskets full, hearts light, Luan asked: "Is this stealing if we're caught? Mother said we should never steal."

Beni mused. They both struggled to hold the hand cart's weight against the gentle downsloping track. A cloud passed for a moment across the sun, a breath of shade.

"In this land," he said after a bit, "there's a proverb: The fruit that grows over the fence is God's to give, and ours to carry away."

Luan nodded, as if that settled everything.

# The Ghost in the Glaze

The clay came from the hills behind the workshop, where the earth ran red beneath pine and persimmon. In the rainy months, Soetsu would dig it by hand, his breath clouding in the cold. He'd carry it back in slatted wooden crates, still wet with roots and stone.

The boy Akimitsu—his grandson and apprentice then—had once asked why they didn't order clay like the other potters in the valley.

"Because you don't know it if you haven't touched it at its first opening to the sky," Soetsu said. "You don't know what it can become in the kiln."

They soaked the raw clay in springwater until it slaked—melted like bread left too long in broth. It turned to slip, heavy and grey, settling into wide shallow pans. There it thickened for days while crows paced the roof, watching. When the time came, they lifted it out in hunks, drying it on cloth-covered racks until it could be kneaded with the heels of their hands.

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Akimitsu loved wedging: folding and pushing, over and over, pressing the clay down and forward, then scooping it back up to push again. The mound would turn in his hands like dough, round and stubborn, mounding like a ramshead. “It’s like making the earth remember,” he’d said to Soetsu once. “Or like waking it up.”

The boy was curions—light in his existence then—always wanting to know about everything, why trees had branches, why flowers had petals, and why dragonflies had wings. “Sofu-san?” he asked, “Did you ever want to be someone else?” Then he ran from his tasks, arms wide, out into the field by the kiln, and back inside again.

The old man had shushed him. Told him, angrily, “*Aki! Go wedge more clay!*”

Aki was lost, taken by a fever in the year of the fire winds, before his first real tea bowl piece could be finished. The bowls he’d been working on sat on the highest shelf, still unfired, their walls too thin, lips uneven. Now Soetsu never looked at them. But he kept them. And he kept making bowls with that same clay.

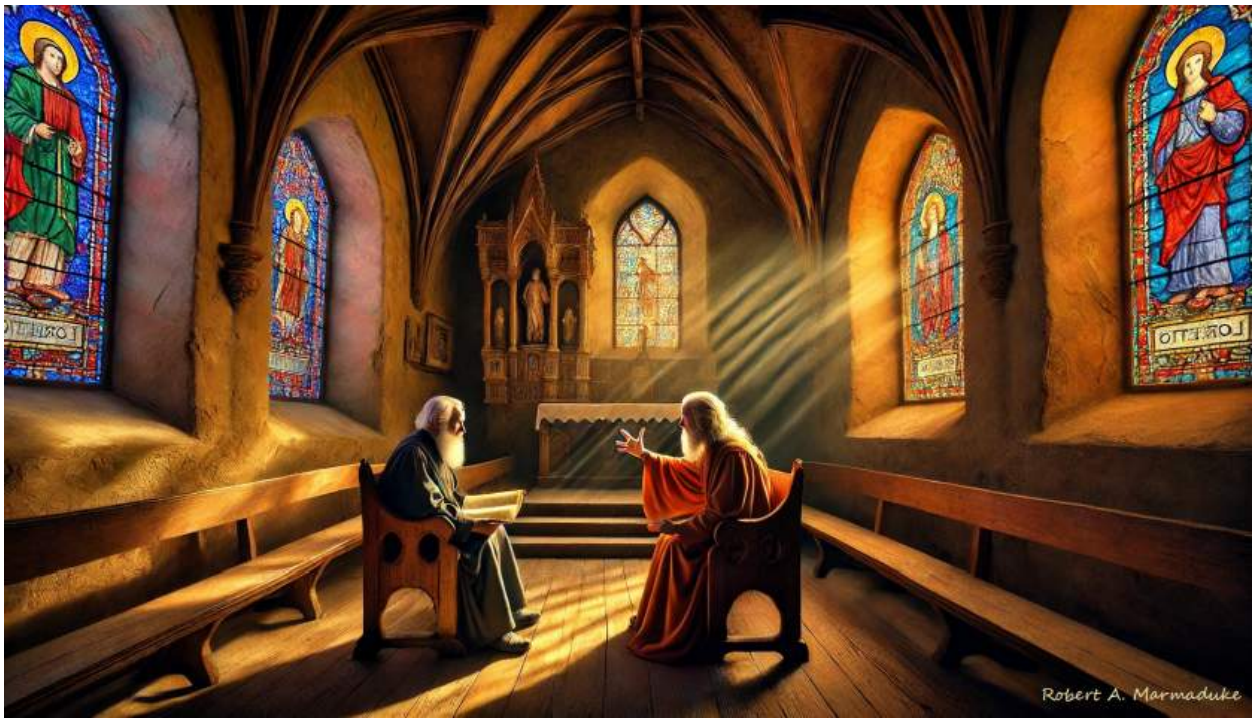
Years had passed, while he forgot his solemn isolation. The kiln burned hot with pine and cedar, the sap hissing like angry spirits. Soetsu glazed each piece in silence, mixing ash and iron and salt, praying not for beauty, but memory.

One winter night, after a long firing, he found a single tea bowl in the kiln’s center, its glaze alive with deep red streaks and golden webbing in chocolate—the color Aki had once tried to create for show. The glaze had pooled unevenly at the foot, the way the boy’s had. The rim thinned enough to suggest his youthful hand.

Soetsu drank from that tea bowl each morning.

*The tea tastes of ash and snowmelt.*
*Of hands that never stopped working.*
*Of a voice once near, now buried in clay.*
*And the clay, ever ancient,*
*yields again*
*to an exact pressure.*

# The Last Argument of Chrysippus




The cathedral smelled of incense, wood and limestone. The chapel, of prayer.

Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop once, prisoner now, stepped into the transept like a man walking into his soon tomb. His shoulders stooped beneath a borrowed cope, the linen fabric trembling slightly in draughts. A Latin Psalter was tucked beneath one arm. His other hand, the right one, the betrayer, hung limply.

He did not look at the elderly priest waiting for him near the altar. Two wooden chairs had been set facing together. The priest motioned for Thomas to sit in one.

“Father,” said the priest softly, “You are early.”

The priest was a Dominican, perhaps. Or one of the Marian chaplains brought to Oxford to oversee the cleansing of heresy. His robes bore no emblem but the cross;

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his face, no mockery. Outside, the bells tolled None. It was March, and England, never warm, had grown colder since Mary Tudor reclaimed the throne.

“I am afraid of being late,” Cranmer said. “Late to renounce. Later still to abjure.”

“But you have signed the recantation,” said the priest. “Not once, but six times! And now you will speak it. Publicly. We understand this to be undertaken by you!”

Thomas Cranmer rested a hand on the carved wood chair arm, feeling the ache of it. “I have rehearsed the words,” he said. “But they die in my throat. I cannot.”

The older priest tilted his head. “You stood beside Henry. You forged his break from Rome. You crowned Edward, and blessed the new Book of Prayer. You have led Luther’s Protest. And yet, rather than recant now, you would die for that?”

“I am already dead,” Cranmer said. “But I can choose how I die.”

The priest looked at him steadily. “There is still time,” he sighed. “To remain penitent. Speak what is expected, to what you’ve signed. *Live a little longer*.”

“When I was young,” Cranmer said, “I believed that truth was a sword. That once drawn, it cut away all doubt. Now I believe doubt is a flame. It burns everything—our robes, our pride, our name. And only what cannot be burned is real, is truth.”

“And what is that?” the older priest bent his head, thumbing his eyes.

Cranmer stared sightless. “Remorse for having once recanted,” he said. “Hope, and the dreadful urgency of my conviction to oppose a forced regression to apostasy.”

*In the house of martyrs,*
*only the soul that burns*
*can light the way back.*

# The Breath of Hope

They called her *Vigilance*—but she'd been *Sister Mercy* once, built for speed in aid and providence, by shipwrights who feared the Pope more than the King.

When the war came, her grace turned to grist, and somewhere off Cartagena, a man named Fallow got her in a Spanish Monte game. He'd bet 'all in' and won. He refitted her at the Brooklyn yards, where gulls shrieked like widows and men signed aboard for rum or ruin. That winter, they gathered a crew from the taverns near New Bedford, deserters, many, sons with no names, men who could read stars but not letters.

And so *Vigilance* took to sea again, providence replanked to piracy.

The *Vigilance* pitched gently in the swell, her weathered timbers groaning like an old man turning in bed. Her canvas bellied with wind out of the northeast, and the gulls screamed a welcome or warning, no man could say which. Beneath her keel, the sea was the color of cut glass, and the clouds above, bruised and blooming, drifted like forgotten sails in a sky grown too wide.

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There are islands not marked on any chart, places passed down not in ink, but in the hush of pipe smoke and tall sea-tales. And it was just such a place that Captain Fallow now pursued—eyes squinting over maps cracked and scrawled in a dozen dead hands.

Captain Fallow stood alone at the helm, his boots spread like compass points, his long coat stirring at the edges. In the dying light of afternoon, the chart on his table showed no name, only a faint smudge of green ink in an expanse of blue—the whisper of peaks near the uninhabited stretch known as Manuae. Folded velvet wreathed in clouds, said to cradle a cove of gold-sifting sands and a grove where fruit hung low as promises.

Below deck, Tragg sat sharpening his blade with long, lazy strokes, the scar on his jaw pale in the lantern light. “Heard tell there’s ghosts,” he muttered to no one in particular. “Island gods with bones for teeth. But it’s the livin’ I fear more than the dead.”

By dawn they made sight of it.

The island tops floated above the sea’s horizon, hemmed by a green shore of palms. The reef showed its teeth just beyond the surf, but they found the cove inlet on the far side, and as morning broke, slipped between headlands into safe anchorage. Sandstone cliffs lined the bay like sentinels.

Fallow gave the word, and the longboat was swung out and manned. They rowed for shore, seven aboard, with the chest stowed beneath a sailcloth and sabers at the ready The beach met them like breath before a kiss—hot, scented with clove and cardamom, the air thick with green and the pulse of hidden drums. No footstep had marred this sand in years, and the jungle beyond leaned forward like a listening ear.

Tragg was the first to set boot on land, then he ordered the chest brought ashore, and told them to fan out in search of caves. He did not speak otherwise. Only looked once back toward the *Vigilance*, her sails reefed.

And somewhere, in the hush between waves and wind, a native wild man crouched where the bamboo met the clearing. Eyes wide. Breath shallow. Watching.

Waiting.

# The Breach of Ruin

It was Captain Fallow who’d brought them through the reef-gap at low tide, sails reefed tight and a grin stitched to his lips, for he'd seen the inlet on an old Spanish chart and dreamed of this day ever since Cartagena.

And now, with the tide slinking back like a thief, the crew knelt before their reward. Seven rough men, elbows sharp, mouths slack with awe. The chest, iron-bound and heavy as sin, lay open to the sun. Gold glimmered like a captive sun god, blinding.

Tragg, the first mate, stood apart, boots planted wide. His cutlass hung loose at his side, its tip tapping the sand with the patience of a hangman. The white scar that striped his cheekbone—from the Governor's blade at Port Rémy—caught the light like a brand.

"Dig, you dogs,” he said, voice calm as a prayer. “Or you’ll be digging your own graves before the tide comes back to watch.’

No one answered. The gold had stolen their tongues.

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Some said the chest was taken from a Portuguese galleon wrecked off Recife, others claimed it had been stolen outright from a Jesuit mission, smuggled south through jungle and blood. Wherever it came from, it bore the weight of too many dead hands.

At the jungle's edge, where the bamboo grew thick as spears and clattered softly in the sea breeze, a wild man watched. Bare-chested, eyes wide, his breath shallow as surf foam. One who knew the old stories. Who knew what happened to men who came to bury treasure, where the island had its own wrathful gods.

He did not retreat from the shadows. He laughed. A rasping, ragged sound—part howl, part warning. It echoed through the clearing like a curse spoken aloud.

Tragg's head jerked up, scanning the jungle at the edge of the beach. But the foliage was impenetrable beyond the row of coconut trees, and thick beach hibiscus bush.

A hush spread over them. The men froze, shovels half-lowered, as if the wild laughter had struck a chord none of them remembered hearing. One spat without looking up. Another crossed himself with hands gone slick with sweat. The jungle no longer waited—it watched. Palpable fear lent a stench to the heat.

Tragg whispered now. 'Dig fast, mates, then we'll make for the ship, before it finds us."

That was when Marley, youngest lowest-rank, reached in to touch the treasure before they slammed the lid shut. To hold a bright coin in his hand, that's all—wide-flared doubloons the color of ripe mango flesh. He held one up to the sun, grinning.

Then suddenly he screamed. His fingers blackened. The stain of gangrene raced up his arm in a flash, spreading like ink dropped in milk. He screamed again and dropped to his knees. His eyes rolled back white as gull feathers. Then he fell, still as driftwood.

The air thickened around them. Heat shimmered, then stilled. No bird called. No branch moved. The light itself seemed to dim, not with dusk, but dread—as if the sun had turned its face against them.

And the chest lay there… still open, still gleaming… waiting for the next victim.

# The Asking Place

The tide was out again, and with it the sky—drained gray like parchment too often written on. He stood barefoot on a rock pinnacle in the shallows, the surf hissing at his ankles. The wind scoured sideways across the flat beach, carrying the smell of kelp and salt and something older still.

He had walked here at dawn. Now it was near dusk. The fish had not yet come. But the asking had already begun. Behind him on the bluff, the castle leaned against the wind. Once it had been a rude hut, of clay and wattles, beside their miserable pigsty. Then he had begged the fish, and the fish granted them a small stone house and a loafing shed.

He no longer remembered that first wish—only that it had seemed harmless. She had asked for a better home, and why not? That became a manor house and stables. Then that suggested to her wealth and power over the realm. At his wife's demands, his next humble wish became a castle, with grand landscaped grounds. The castle had arches now. Lofty towers! A wide eagle's perch balcony from which she could gaze down the cliff face and see him kneeling like a servant or a priest. *To a fish!*

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Once, the fish had shimmered—iridescent with gold and green, a miracle in motion. It had spoken in tones like bells through mist, and the sea around it turned clear. It had felt, if not divine, then close to it. That was long ago. Now the fish rose dull and pale, like a coin rubbed raw. Its eyes goggling without recognition. Its voice had lost all timbre.

She wished now to be Empress. Of what, she did not say. It did not seem to matter. The man's throat caught. The word 'empress' felt wrong in his mouth, like asking for gold dust from snow. "She—" he began, but could not finish. "She … would be Empress!" The surf shushed against his feet. He waited for fury. For the sea to open up and erase him.

"You want…," the flounder said. Then again, flatly: "You want…" Not a question. Not even anger. It gave a slow nod, as though the story had reached its end. It turned, losing interest in the begging man, and slid silently beneath the surging water. Only stillness.

The tide receded further, drawing long skeins of foam back across the flats. A brittle hush —neither peace nor punishment, but the calm that comes after something breaks.

He stood there a long while. Salt spray crusted his legs. It troubled him to breathe.

When at last he climbed the bluff, the castle was gone. Not broken—gone! No tower, no hearth, no lofty gates and heralds. The grass had swallowed all of it, seamlessly. Only a rude hut and a pigsty remained, in the wreck and ruin where the castle had once been.

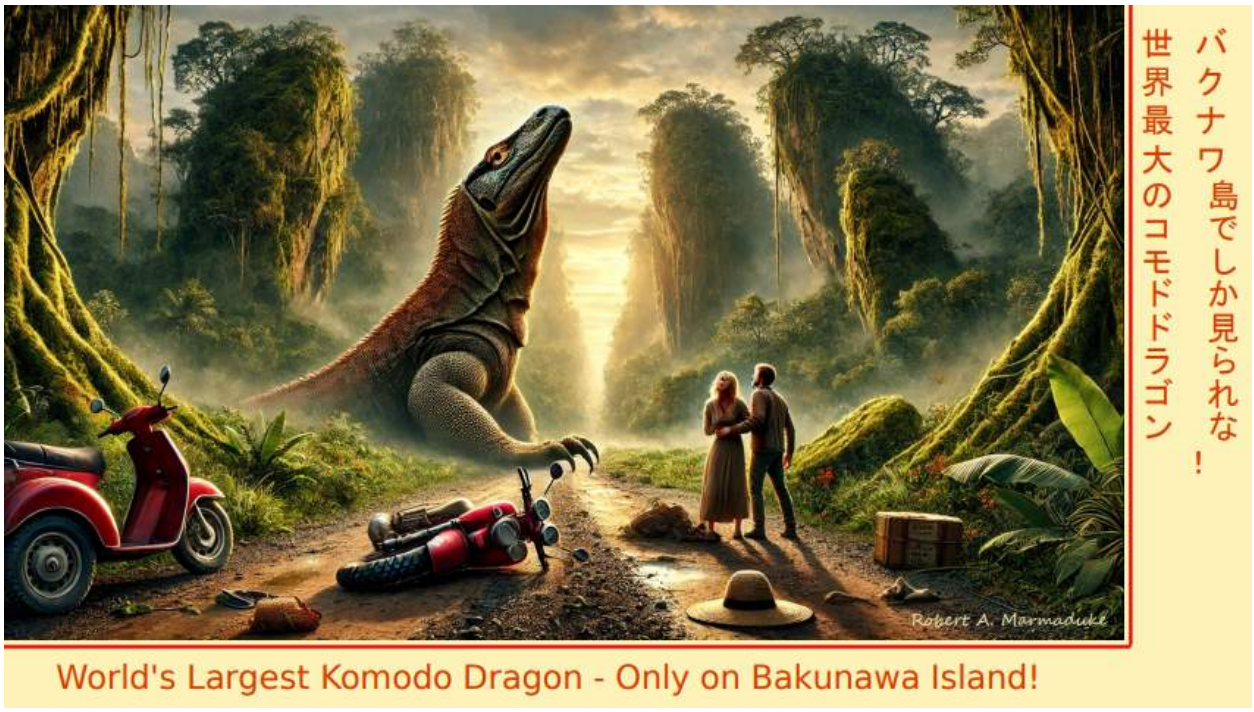
The Woman who would be Empress, even then for the sun to pause at her command, was nowhere to be found. The footprint path  of his wanting on down to the beach had already grown over. Only the rocks remained, asking nothing of him.

He stood on the empty hill by his rude hut, listening for any voice on the wind.

The night sky gave no answer.

[a Retelling of Grimm's Fairy Tales, *The Fisherman and His Wife* - © 1812]

# The Day the Island Breathed Fire




The lanterns swayed gently above them, casting crescent shadows on the banana leaves. The fire crackled low, sending up little sparks like impatient stars. Around it, five pairs of eyes—wide, brown, and unblinking—stared up at their father, Manu'u, who had pulled his stool into a storyteller stance.

"So you want to go play in the jungle?" They nodded."Alone?" They yelled, 'YES!' "You want the truth?" he asked, his expression somber. "You sure?"

Even his smallest child nodded so hard her braids slapped her cheeks.

"All right then," he said, leaning in and clapping his hands together. "It was a Tuesday."

Groans all around. They knew it was going to be one of his loooong stories.

Manu'u bent low, "A young couple were riding down the jungle trail. It was a beautiful day. The pandanus trees were ripe and wild pigs calmly rooted beneath them for fallen fruit.  Birds chorused. Then the trees *moved*. Not the leaves. Not the birds. The *trees!*

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Before them came a horrible growling sound, like an old man clearing his throat—KRAAAACKHHHH!—and then… *He rose, The Komodo Dragon of Bakunawa!!*"

He lifted his hands high above his head. "Taller than the cliffs! Wider than the school roof! One claw big enough to sweep away all of our houses in a single swoop!"

"The dragon?" his smallest girl whispered.

"The *dragon*!" Manu'u nodded. He looked down at the children. His arms pulled up, his hands curled like claws. He sniffed. "The dragon thought maybe, *just maybe,* he'd have lunch first. YOU!…" He lurched forward, sniffing loudly towards his children.

They blinked, startled, then laughed and scattered as he chased them, then returned to their places. He paused again, lowering his voice like a magician.

"But then the woman said the magic words!"

*"What were they?"* the children all cried.

Manu'u grinned. "I don't know! I wasn't there!"

Laughter exploded around the fire. Even his wife chuckled, preparing a plate of lychee, sweet rice wrapped in banana leaf, skewered river prawns hot from the coals, and a bowl of tamarind and salted mango slices that made the children wince and grin all at once.

"But I *do* know this," he said, settling back into his stool with a theatrical sigh. "She put her hand on his chest, and he looked at her like she was a full moon on festival night. And the Dragon? It blinked. Roared. Then retreated slowly back into the jungle."

Manu'u raised a finger. "And that's why none of you—*none of you!*—are ever to go into the jungle alone. Especially on a dark-moon day."

Suddenly the fire popped loudly. The children jerked back, surprised, then laughed.

A billion stars wheeling in the Milky Way sky, that had waited until the tale was done, and now shone even brighter than the Moon.

# The Falconer Meets the Fairy Spirit

Once, in the days when moonlight still touched certain paths with spellcraft and princes might carry worry as gently as they carried swords, there lived a young man bred for statecraft, but still burdened with love for the ailing Queen Mother.

The old phrenologist — a stooped and wrinkled relic with eyes like clouded glass — had pressed his fingers to the crown of her head, and then whispered to the prince: “Your grandmother, the Queen Dowager, has only a season left, unless three cowslips be gathered by a fairy hand, and brought before a fortnight passes.”

So the young prince, who loved the old Queen, left the stone halls of his childhood, rode through fields silvered with early mist, and entered the woods at the edge of evening — that hour when the birds no longer sing, but the forest has not yet begun to dream.

There, by the hollow-grassed trail, stood a red fox with a golden glinting eye.

“Spare my kin in your hunt,” it said, its voice was clean as riverwater. “Spare them in all of your days, and I shall show you the path to your flower-fingered fairy princess.”

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“I swear it,” the prince said, and the fox knew he meant it, true. It blinked once, twice — then rose up like steam from a teacup and became a beautiful woman of flaxen veils and firelight hair, feet bare upon the moss, leaving no print. He pulled her up behind him.

They rode by starlight and by silence, deeper into the wood, until at last they came upon a glade stitched with moonbeams and perfumed with the breath of a thousand flowers. There she hovered — the fairy princess — a gauze of wings and glowing fluorescent light, gathering cowslips as though plucking stars from the dewy grass. The prince's breath caught; he read of enchantment like this, but had not expected it to be so captivating.

Knowing the prince’s heart, she laid the flowers on his saddle horn. “Farewell,” she said to the fox-woman, “I’ll be gone ‘ere his heart can catch mine.”

The cowslips were laid in a pouch of spider-silk, and the prince, grateful beyond words, looked up, but there was only moonlight left. He helped the fox-woman back astride his steed. She rode with a hush in her throat and her hand pressed lightly to his side.

Then halfway down the mountain road, with the castle roofs visible below, he became so enchanted by her touch, that he turned and whispered, “Tell me your name, then.”

She only smiled and slipped from the saddle as mist slips from the hills at dawn. As her feet touched the ground, she bowed low, then shimmered — no longer woman, no longer human, but again the wild red fox, darting toward the shadowed edge of the wood.

So, the Queen Dowager lived on in good health for many years. The Royal Phrenologist stayed employed with his potions and pomaces to keep her so.

The Tale of the Cowslip became a minstrel song and soon the legend spread far and wide, as throughout the kingdom’s lands and estates, both paupers and priests and tradesmen alike bowed deeply and reverently at the Prince’s horseback passing.

And though the Prince ruled wisely, and wed kindly, and had children who called him Father, he still rode daily that same path at dusk, — listening for her silvered voice, yipping softly in the briar, with only the wild ferns to trace her passing.

# Beldam’s Rebellion

She was not first summoned, and that was their sin.

They made their bargain in the dark of the moor, three hags with hands like twigs, chattering their rot into the ear of a man already half-mad with ambition. But it was not theirs to give. The rites were ancient, and order mattered more than desire. Hecate watched as they danced outside the law she had kept hidden for centuries, and when they dared call it magic, she called it treason.

In the moon’s white fire, she did not howl. She pronounced.

“Have I not reason?” she asked, not of them, but of the air — as if it might testify.

They had made of their gifts a rebellion.

They had made of her absence a heresy.

They had forgotten that even Chaos has a queen.

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And so she came now, not to punish, but to reclaim the shape of things. To remind them that every spell has a splice. Every charm, a chain.

Not all judgment burns. Some, like hers, merely arrive — uninvited, irrevocable.

What had they done, these beldams? Whispered riddles, traded futures, called up death like a favored dog. And Macbeth — oh, that fractured man — took their words as gospel and mistook doom for destiny.

He was not the first. *Men often mistake omen for permission, and prophecy for excuse.*

Hecate had seen it before: generals who crowned themselves with blood, kings who financed ruin as providence. They all believed they were chosen. They never asked.

He shall spurn fate, scorn death, and bear.

His wishes 'bove wisdom, grace, and fear—

and never know that hope was an illusion.

But where was the Soul? Where was his Reckoning?

Hecate's anger was not fire. It was frost. The kind that forms in the bones of the condemned. She had been denied not authority, but meaning. Her art had been used without understanding, her laws recited without prayer.

It was not witching that angered her.

It was the absence — terrifying absence — of awe.

She whispered then, just once: "All is permitted,"

— even the night held its breath, unsure if she had blessed them, or damned them all.

She spoke, and silence knelt to her—

the broken helm, the bloodied prayer.

# Sublimatas et Humilitas?

Before the journey, Leontin walked the lower market in plain tunic, disguised in name only. He haggled gently with dyers, listened to widows speak of spoiled grain, watched children barter polished stones as if they were rubies. He took notes. He made small trades — a length of ribbon for beeswax, a spindle for smoked trout — learning how value shifted in wind and need. Once, he gave a coin to a crippled mason's wife, then helped lift back up an old apple seller's frame, a passing goat-string had twisted down.

"Trade is trust," he told his steward. "If I speak for the Throne of Glaz, let them see me first as man, then as their Prince."

And so he knelt, not in a chapel nor in the hush of penance, but in the vaulted hall of his own undoing. The torches guttered. The lords of court leaned upon their staffs. The bishops' rings caught the gloom like coins in shallow water.

Prince Leontin of Glaz, heir to nine mines and a single rusted sword, had been sent to the Carpatho-Rusyns with velvet and silver to open trade. But he, being bred on soft

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words and candied fruits, had mistaken laughter for honor. They gave him mead, and he drank; they spoke in riddles, and he answered in vows. When he awoke, the mules were gone, gifts sold to passing Tatars, the silver talents stolen, and in his hand a scroll:

*"If thy King would trade, let him bring better sons … or come himself."*

Now he bowed before his father, the King, whose throne rose like judgment behind seven steps of carved basalt, and the courtiers watched not in pity, but in sport. His velvet cloak—borrowed from a cousin—had frayed at the hem. His boots were crusted in mountain mud. A boy of nineteen, sent out a man, returned a page with empty hands.

A knight whispered: "He weeps."
A bishop sniffed: "Too late."
Yet the King said nothing.

Leontin raised his eyes. "Father, the Rusyns mocked me."
"Aye."
"They said the wolf eats the lamb that bleats."
"They are not wrong."
"I gave your Name in faith—"
"And you have lost it."

The hall was quiet then, save for the soft tapping of the herald's cane. No jest would save the Prince. No uncle's purse. The court waited to see if punishment would fall like the guillotine of old, or if mercy might yet win out.

The king turned his royal seal ring once, twice, slowly, and gazed past his prostrate son.

"You will go again," he said at last. "Go without velvet. Go without coin. Go with steel. And this time, you will wrest back something worth this groveling with your sword.

Leontin swallowed hard, and bowed again, lower.

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*Now we see, by light of pride made dim, that gold is naught, if not first mined within.*

# Inheritance of the Absent

He had a name once, before it got rubbed down to a mutter. Somewhere in the drawers of a bank, his social security number is still sleeping, but no one's looked for it in years. He walks the city now by scent and shape—street lights buzzing like flies, newspaper pages folding into corners like small regrets.

His mom worked nights. She made meatloaf with too many breadcrumbs, always said, "There's enough if we stretch it." She stretched a lot of things. Her back. Her hours. Her voice, when she told the counselor he'd turn out okay. But she got sick the same year the

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checks stopped coming, and the refrigerator light turned into a kind of question mark. He got shuffled after that—distant cousins, shelters, group homes. No really bad guys.

There at one group home, he met Dex, a cook. Dex had a laugh that could crack concrete and a way of flipping pancakes that made breakfast feel like a holiday. Dex believed in second chances, even third ones. She kept a photo of her daughter taped inside the pantry door, a reminder of what she was working for. Her daughter was a runaway.

That was her, Jill— who became his street friend, whose name he never says. She had a smile that made the fluorescent lights seem less harsh and a way of listening that made silence feel safe. They'd sit on the back steps after lights out, sharing stories and dreams, or go sit in a cafe for the wifi, so she could text her father for money. He never replied.

Dreams are brittle in places like group homes. One night, Jill didn't come back. They found her in an alley, by the dumpsters, the life already gone from her eyes. The police said they'd already got the 9-11 call, and would have an ambulance pickup by morning.

Dex tried to keep the kitchen running, but the light her eyes soon dimmed. You don't lose your daughter, and just keep spinning platters of food. A week later, Dex was gone too, a note left behind that simply read, "I'm real sorry, but I can't do this no more."

That was years ago now. His cart squeaks like a half-remembered lullaby. He knows which alleys echo, which corners carry breath. He keeps a bungee cord around the best stuff—blankets, old boots, a transistor radio with a scratchy dial tuner. He doesn't panhandle. Doesn't talk at all. That's his mantra, his shield, "Shadow Man."

Sometimes, in his head, he writes the movie of his life backwards—starting with the silence, back to the kitchen, the meatloaf, the cradle. Roll credits. Fade to Black.

A patrol car glides slowly past, pausing.

The officer looks over, but then moves on.

The city doesn't ask anything of you.

The city doesn't care what you have to say.

# Sermon for a Shattered God

They never told the blacksmith's apprentice about gods and man, only how to prepare the forge and shape the blade. Only how to strike white-hot iron in rhythm with the bellows' breath. How to pull back when the heat curled too close to your knuckles, and how to feel the metal's heart in your bones as it bent to your will.

He was at the forge alone the day the sky opened.

The others had gone to the river, to check the goats they found dead at the water's edge. He stayed behind, finishing a hinge for a church door the parson said was needed. The coals in the furnace glowed like rubies, the anvil shimmered. That was when he felt it — a change in the air. A hush, a puff, like every breath in the world paused at once.

Then the winds came behind, and with it, everything else.

The priests had no words for what the sky became. In the old chapel with its stone floor and beeswax reek, they lit the incense and chanted their thin Latin and said the bones of saints could hold the world together. But no one believed that now.

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The storm came first. It tore the weather vanes loose from every steeple and flung them into fields where sheep lay broken-necked. Then the roof tiles flew off like pigeons. Then the heat came, a furnace bellowed in God's own throat.

The clouds split wide with cold fire and Chaos. And then—*He* came. Daemon!

Not man, not beast, but something shaped in both their images and lightning flamed. A towering celestial shape stitched of light and agony, his eyes like cathedral arches, his mouth a wound of unmaking. He screamed not in rage, but in something worse — a kind of mourning, as if the world had already ended and he alone need remain.

The young blacksmith's apprentice doused the forge, threw off his leather apron and ran bravely towards the fields, holding aloft a sword his master had forged and finished.

In the scorched field, the bereft had gathered. Not to beg, not to pray. Only to witness. Hooded, torch-bearing, eyes uplifted like children waking from a nightmare they do not yet understand. For among them, a New Being now walked, a single figure in shining vestments stepping forward — neither priest nor rebel, but some new thing, crowned with golden auras and with limitless *understanding*.

The Being met the Daemon's gaze. The sky split in fury and thunder. In that terrible instant, the world could've ended. Instead, prayers were answered. The heavens bent.

The Daemon lowered its gaze. The fire left. Cool ashes fell like snow. And for the first time in a hundred generations, the heavens offered not judgment… but *mercy*.

Later, now everyone speaks of it. The fields healed. Bells rang. And in quiet corners of ruined cathedrals, a new creed was whispered, in a language no book had ever held.

A new world was being forged.

*The sky wept gods with mouths of storm,*
*And winds that shred the human form.*
*But through the howl, a whisper came—*
*not wrath, but peace, without a name.*

# Visages de Cendre (Faces of Ash)

The rail spur cuts through the yard like a scar. On the left, the crane bays gape open, iron ribs rusted bloody in the damp. On the right, the factory walls press close—brick teeth stained black from coughing smoke. The air stinks of tar and the leather aprons we boil to keep from cracking. And sweat, the kind that crusts your shirt stiff by noon.

We stand in a knot by the tracks. Fifty of us. Sixty. Arms folded. Silent. The foremen call this *"le silence qui précède la matraque"*—the quiet before the truncheon. I spit. My teeth taste of blood. Not from the bosses. From the bread we gnaw, gritty as mortar.

*"Ils viennent,"* murmurs Léon. The police? The owner? God himself? Doesn't matter. *They're all the same Iron Claw in the Velvet Glove.*

You want to know who we are? We're the ones your lamp oil burns for. The names they rub off the payroll when the shifts run long:

Léon, the forge-man, fingers twisted like roots from quenching red-hot rivets in water. Marie-la-Rouge, her hair dyed pink from arsenic dyes. She coughs violets onto her cuffs.

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Le Petit—just an orphan boy, really, who sleeps curled in the coal bin like a stray dog.

And me? *Je m'appelle* Raph. Crane grease is my baptism. The foreman calls me *"le doigt de Dieu"*—God's finger— I guide the hooks that lift steel beams heavier than guilt.

We're not striking for more *sous*. We're striking because yesterday, Le Petit got his arm pulled into the rollers. The boss tossed him two francs and a shrug. *"C'est la Machine qui mange l'Homme,*" he said. *The Machine eats the Man.*

That night, we voted with our fists on the table. Even the rats stopped to listen.

Now the cold gnaws through our clogs. Somewhere, a train whistle screams—the Paris express, perhaps, fat with bankers and silk. The kind of train we build but never board.

Léon lights a cigarette with hands that shake. Not from fear. From the tremors the forge leaves in your bones. *"Ils viendront par là,*" he says, nodding toward Rue de la Misère. To where the police strike-breakers always appear from.

Marie hums "La Marseillaise" under her breath, but the tune curdles into something darker. A hymn for the chewed-up and spat-out, waiting for the baton and the cell.

---

You there, with your belly full, your nice shoes clean and dry: Look at us. Really look. Look at your hands. Soft hands. School hands, meant one day to work in some office.

We're not a mob. We're not a "rabble." We're the reason your world doesn't collapse. Every rivet in your pretty carriages, every stitch in your school uniform, the hand-split leather in your school books binding—our fingerprints are ground into them like dirt.

The police will come. They'll swing their clubs. Some of us will break. Some will vanish into cells that stink of piss and regret for the loss of our families.

But tomorrow, the machines will slumber without us. And for the first time, the bosses will hear it—the silence we've been weaving into the strike all along. A silence that costs more than they can pay—but never would have paid to us anyway.

# Champagne Days

It was one of those parties where no one ever says goodbye, only drifts away. Olivia wore cream slacks and a scarf the color of overripe peaches, which she allowed to fall off her shoulder with strategic regularity. She didn't know the owner of the yacht, just the friend of someone's decorator, but she smiled like she'd paid for the party.

Julian had brought his guitar but didn't take it out. "No one really plays anymore," he'd muttered earlier, sipping prosecco like it had insulted his lineage. He had salt-crusted hair and skin the color of sand. He hadn't been home to Connecticut in four years.

There was talk of Paris in October. Of hedge funds payouts and romantic heartbreaks. Of a woman who swore off gluten and marriage in the same sentence. Someone's laugh carried, too shrill, and everyone paused long enough to remember they were pretending to be light, then surreptitiously thumb scroll to check their Tik-Tok selfie.

Below deck, down in the galley no one noticed, the first mate was slicing lime into neat quarters. He wore rubber-soled shoes and a silence as polished as the chrome railing.

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From time to time, he'd glance toward the water — that bruised velvet shimmer — and think of champagne flutes trembling not with laughter, but with a deep-throated engine hum, that time when he'd taken the boss's business guests out on the open bay.

He  remembered those older parties — real ones — when the older generation came aboard. They were gracious, worn down, sun-wrinkled from work and wins and their long, negotiated lives. They'd arrive in pressed shirts with jazz on the radio and they opened a vintage wine bottle like it meant something. Châteauneuf-du … *something*.

He used to serve them Stilton and figs and smoked oysters on tiny toasts, preparing canapes for the party on the back deck, as they floated in the darkness of Oakland Bay where he steered them, to watch the 4th of July fire-works.

One woman, gray-haired and magnificent, had brought a book of Neruda and read aloud as fireworks lit the sky. She had called him "young man" and winked, then asked what he 'was reading'. He never forgot that night, *tres chic*.

Tonight, the only reading was scrolling i-Phones. Someone joked about renting a whole island "just to unplug," and everyone laughed, eyes flicking toward new text flags.

Up top, Julian squinted toward the horizon. "What is true lassitude, really?" he asked no one in particular. Olivia didn't answer. She was already posing again — glass lifted, scarf draped, soul untroubled, her phone held at arms-length. Clik…clik….

*The sea is blue, but no one swims.*
*The glasses clink, but no one sings.*
*Beauty passes through them untouched.*
*And under rosy-dusk champagne skies,*
*someone dreams of a music slow as breath,*
*strange enough they might forget themselves.*
*If anyone wept later, it was from boredom alone.*
*Tomorrow, they would forget today ever happened.*

# Trăng Mồ Côi (Orphan Moon)

The moon slipped between the factory's razor wires like a smuggled coin.

Lan sat with her back against the dormitory fence, her knees pulled to her chest, the concrete leaching warmth from her thighs. The city had given her three things: a sewing machine that gnawed her fingertips raw, a cot that smelled of other girls' sweat, and this courtyard—eight paces wide, fenced in like a chicken run.

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Back home, the moon had been a friend. It silvered the rice paddies where she'd once crouched at six years old, her small hands plucking snails from the mud as her grandmother's voice wove through the dark: *"À ơi… con tă `m nó nhả tơ…"* The lullaby had been a spell against hunger. Now, the moon was an aloof taunt above.

A cloud smudged the light. Lan imagined it was the steam from her mother's iron, pressing pleats into some rich woman's *áo dài*. She'd watched her mother do this a thousand times—the hiss of the iron, the sharp creases like knife folds.

"Every *đô `ng* is a grain of rice," her mother had said, tucking a 500-*đô `ng* note into Lan's pocket the day she left for work. "Swallow the pride, keep the hunger."

The stars were faint above the smog. Frost wouldn't come here—just a damp cold that clung like guilt. She traced the razor wire's shadow on the ground, a jagged scar cutting the moon's reflection into pieces.

*I see the moon, … does the moon see me? A thousand other girls, just like me?*

A memory flickered: her grandmother's gnarled hands, tying a red thread around Lan's wrist at the village temple, *"Trăng tròn có thể đem lại những năng."* The full moon brings positive energy. Now, she pressed her thumb to the red thread, hidden under her sleeve. The factory rules forbade wearing jewelry, but this was only a knotted red thread. A knot meant to return home some day.

Lan stood, brushing grit from her uniform. The night-shift bell would ring soon, and Supervisor Lý docked pay for lateness. Three minutes late, one bowl of *phở* gone. She'd learned to hate the bell's metallic shriek, but she imagined it was her mother's lullaby: "*À ơi*…." before her, 'Swallow the pride, keep the hunger.'

As she looked up a last time, the full moon broke free of the clouds—just for a second—flooding the courtyard with light so bright, it hid the razor wire.

The gong rang. *Vượt qua!* the loudspeaker tolled. *Vượt qua!* Break over!

Lan turned and walked back inside.

# The March Of Mankind

The Reverend Jebediah Holloway's sweat glittered like cheap varnish under the revival tent's patchwork canopy. His sleeves were buttoned down to hide arms gone blue-white while living in the shadows, his hair pasted to his forehead like strips of oilcloth.

"Romans THIR-TEEN!" he bellowed, The microphone squealed as if scalded. "The law is LOVE, y'all—love thick as sorghum syrup, an' just as SWEET! Yes, SIR!"

A red-faced woman in a calico dress fanned herself. The sheriff slouched onstage.

"Now I KNOW what you're thinkin'—" Jebediah's voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "'But Preacher, my neighbor done stole my hogs!' Well, lemme tell you—" The tent shuddered as he slammed the pulpit. "Ain't no hog worth your SOUL!"

The crowd rippled—a sigh of amens, the rustle of dollar bills tugged from overall pockets. Behind the plywood lectern, the Reverend's shoes were handmade Italian leather, scuffed just enough to prove he walked among the flock.

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From the second row, beneath the sagging shadow of an orchard fan that hummed like a dying locust, she rose up. Blue dress clinging to her like the last respectable sin of the evening. Her lipstick was the kind you could smell. And when she opened her mouth, it wasn't for the choir. *It was for the spirit moving her!*

*"A-ba-sha-tai!"* she shrieked, flinging her arms wide like she was catching the Holy Spirit by the hem and wrestling it to the dirt. *"Re-ka-tom-da-liah!"* Her head jerked back, and the pins flew from her hair like startled sparrows.

Jebediah stiffened. Sweat rolled down his cheek, into the high clerical collar like it had somewhere better to be. His mouth opened, closed. The microphone let out a low moan of static. He did not dare look at her. Not directly. *They had sinned!*

But Lord, everybody else did, why not the preacher?

The sheriff adjusted his belt with the slow delight of a man watching someone else's truck slide off a cliff. Jebediah clutched the pulpit with white-knuckled hands.

"Love don't cost a thing," he thundered, while his teenage nephew wove through the crowd with a galvanized bucket. "But sinners—oh, sinners pay *INTEREST!"*

A farmer in back muttered, "Cut me a fat hog!" The blue dress lady flopped back down. The sheriff chuckled into his collar. Out past the tent flaps, where the kudzu swallowed forests whole, a mule twitched its ears at the racket, flicking a bot fly away.

The offering bucket jingled its way through the crowd. In the field, a heifer rolled in the dirt, untroubled by 'makin' bacon' preachers, or that particular stench of holy roller Signs and Tribulations salvation. It knew what the faithful didn't—some hogs get fed, but others get 'et up, and the difference ain't the Lord's doing.

Book of Second Ruminations, 4:17
*"And lo, the shepherd did pass the plate, not for want, but for the comforts thereof.*
*He preached love's repentance from a fiery pulpit, and saved souls at the bank deposit.*
*The Lord giveth Mercy not unto the fleece-shearer, nor the nephew, nor the sheriff —*
*Only upon the sheep that should better have known that they were being fleeced."*

# Chuồn Chuồn

The frogs had been singing since dawn. It was rice planting. Hiên could hear them now, their throats puffing like tiny bellows between the rice stalks as she bent low, her fingers sinking into the cool mud. Her stepmother's voice still rang in her ears: *'Slow again. Your dead mother would be so ashamed of you.'*

Hiên had said nothing. She'd learned silence was a shield.

The sun gilded higher. She straightened, brushing a damp strand of hair from her face. The ache in her back was a dull companion, but here—alone with the frogs and the tight-wrapped rice bundle, ready to plant—she could pretend life was kind and gentle as her own mother was.

A frog blinked up at her from the water. She held out her hand to cradle it. "You're lucky," she whispered. "No one tells you to hurry."

Her stepmother's voice cut the air: *"Hiên! The sheaves won't get planted themselves!"*

The dragonfly startled, lifting into the light. For a moment, Hiên imagined it was her mother's spirit, lingering just beyond reach. She reached out—

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*"Lazy girl!"* A clod of mud struck Hiên's shoulder. Thao, her step-sister stood at the paddy's edge, arms crossed. "If you don't finish, you'll eat kneeling by the stove!" Kneeling on the tile floor to eat meant dishonor. It was where servants crouched.

Hiên bent in the mud, stabbing rice shoots along the paddy fringe, when a splash startled her—a fledgling bird, mottled brown, thrashing in the water. A tiger shrike, its wings too new for flight. Hiên cradled the bird. Its heart beat wild against her palm.

That night, while the stepmother snored and Thao dreamed of her praise, Hiên split bamboo strips outside. Her knees ached against the earth, but the basket took shape—a woven cradle. She fed the bird her meal, whispering, "*Ăn đi, bé nhỏ*." Eat, little one.

The next day, and all the days after, she hid it in her sleeve, feeding it rice grains and paddy bugs, watching it grow bolder. Its feathers darkened. Its eyes grew sharp.

Thao noticed her lingering in the fields and narrowed her eyes. "Always dawdling. What are you hiding? You'd better not be wasting food," she snapped. *"Mother says girls who steal food become wives to ghosts."*

By the time the rice was planted, the bird had hopped up to the basket's edge, ready for flight. Hiên smuggled it to the paddy, hiding the shrike in her sleeve. Dragonflies darted like needles stitching sky to water. "Someday," she told it, "you'll fly beyond the hills."

The tiger shrike finally leapt into the air. Its wings cleared the rice stalks. Hiên's breath caught—but then the wind lifted the bird, carrying it toward the jungle's green veil.

A single feather drifted back, landing in the water beside her, twisting slowly.

That evening, as she knelt by the stove, her stepsister flipped Hiên's bowl upside down. "*Không làm thì không có mà ăn!*" No supper for lazy girls!"

In the ashes, Hiên found some few unburnt grains, clinging like white pearls in the soot. She pressed them to her tongue. They tasted not so much of bitterness, but of small things remembered: a dragonfly's wings, a bird's heartbeat, the quiet world between rice stalks where frogs sing without shame.

# ‘tl’o’kwal al’ta (Hard Moons Now)

They came down from the ridge in a staggered file—five men, woolen coats stiff with pea hail, surveyor’s tools lashed to their backs and boots heavy with muck. Captain Hillsboro led them, jaw set, eyes scanning the winter beach below like it was a cipher to be solved. His men said little. They had followed the inlet west, seeking a trading camp.

The Clatsop were already gathered—ten, maybe fifteen souls tending spits near the mouth of the estuary. No signals of alarm were raised. No weapons drawn. A woman glanced up from her cooking, then returned to folding camas into a hot stone pit. The children didn’t even pause their game of knuckle bones.

Captain Hillsboro paused at the forest edge. Below, driftwood lay in scatterings and crosses, as if washed from some forgotten ark. Strands of seaweed  hung like threadbare flags at the high tide line. The seas had stripped the stones bare and left it with offerings: whale bones, rope, kelp, dead seabirds, lost things. *‘The beach,’* Hillsboro wrote later in his journals, *‘is a ledger of what the sea no longer wanted on its books.’*

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The gnarled driftwood, salt-bleached and split like old bones, lay in jagged heaps where the tide had tossed them. Beyond the tideline, the foothills hunched under their first dusting of snow, the evergreens standing black against the pallid sky.

Behind it all, immense and indifferent, the mountain watched—Wy'east, *Snows-to-the-Sky*, its peak a tome of white against the fading light.

They had come to meet the hunger before it came for them. The Party—pale as the driftwood, their woolens stiff—camped beside the Clatsop, their hands mirroring the work of splitting alder sticks, of cooking salmon flesh over coals. No one spoke of the thin months ahead. Winds carried the knowing anyway, hissing through the dry sedge.

Captain Hillsboro wrote: *'I kept my distance from their cooking fires but moved slow among them, chin tucked against the salt-spray, indicating a desire to trade.'*

*'These people know how to portion to the very end of things,'* he thought. An old man from the north—his hair braided with gull feathers—pressed a thumb into the salmon's flesh, testing. His eyes flicked toward the Hillboro survey party a'ways down the beach.

Hillsboro did not see the glance, but the women tending the fish did. They knew: this meal would be a covenant. The ocean had given its last silver rush; the deer had gone to farther grounds. Now, only the mountain's snows would swell the rivers again for the salmon's return, and that was a very long way off.

Ilchee, a grandmother of 57 years, stirred a broth of dried camas and mussels.. She offered a bowl to the nearest of Hillsboro's men. The acceptance was wordless.

Beyond the firelight, the tide began its slow return up the beach. The mountain's shadow stretched across the water, blue and cold. Somewhere in the woods, a raven called twice—*take a note, take a  note*—before the sound was swallowed by the breakers. The children, their bellies full for now, threw the last of the salmon heads to the gulls. The birds fought over the scraps, their cries sharp as broken shells.

By spring, some of these faces would be missing. The mountain knew this. The beach knew. But tonight, there was alder smoke and the low murmur of voices, the fire stitching its fragile pool of warmth and light into the dark hunger months ahead.

# The Last Bow

Eddie McEddy was his name, though no one had called him that in thirty years. They shouted "Hey, Red!" when they wanted to bum a cigarette or see him pretend to trip over his own shoes, and he'd comply, his knees popping like corn in a skillet. The hat his girlfriend made—that starfish of crimson satin—had been new once, back when his stubble was still dark enough that the white greasepaint couldn't smother it. Now white whiskers pushed through like snow angels, and the foundation settled into the ravines of his face like a cracked mirror.

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He'd learned early that clowns don't get to be tired of being funny. The rules were simple: the paint stayed bright, the slapstick stayed loud, and the sadness stayed tucked behind the ribs like a booze flask. Eddie kept all three, though the flask had been empty since the hallucinations made him quit.

The kids didn't laugh at him anymore, not really. They'd giggle because their parents did, or because they'd been taught that clowns equaled joy, same as two plus two equals five. But their eyes—Christ, their eyes were like little scalpels. They saw the sweat bleeding through his collar, the tremor in his hands when he fumbled a juggle. They saw the way his painted smile (always a scimitar slash, always too wide) strained at the edges, as if the skin beneath might split.

Eddie had known a clown named Lennie once, back when he traveled with the fair. Big Black dude, friendly as a barn cat. They'd shared a trailer together. Lennie would bring strays back after the show to feed hot dogs to, whispering *'You're a good pup, yeah?'*

Lennie used to say every clown died twice: the first time was when they started to forget their bits. Eddie hadn't hung up anything yet—couldn't afford to—but he knew he was halfway to gone. The routines had names: the Trip-Splat, the Invisible Ladder, the Duck Parade. He'd written them in a spiral notebook once, back when he thought another clown might use them, like a treasure map of pratfalls. But that was years ago. Now the bit names lived only in his bones, and even those were starting to forget the moves.

He sat in the parking lot behind the IGA, peeling his makeup off with a boosted Wet-Nap. The greasepaint came away in gray curds, revealing the roadmap of burst capillaries beneath his sunken cheeks. Passing by with her grocery cart, a mother scolded her kid: *'Stop staring, it's rude.'* Eddie waved at the boy anyway, because that's what clowns do. The kid didn't wave back. Just pressed his face into his mother's thigh, hiding from the raw, unfunny worn-out creature that he'd glimpsed.

The horizon turned pale lemon in Eddie's eyes. It started to snow in thin flakes.

# Moving On to Brighter Things

Before the pregnancy, it was Lemar who kept the apartment clean.

Just twelve, but solid like an oak planted early. He walked himself to school, washed the dishes without being asked, learned to fold tiny laundry like the baby was already here. He didn't say much. Just nodded when Tanya faltered, brought her tea when she struggled and cried, left little notes on the fridge that said things like:

*You got this, Ma. We can do this!*

But Tanya had faltered. It was all becoming too much. It was …

She ran when the baby was born, and sought the street. The hospital called CPS, and they brought Lemar and the baby to his grandmother, after a conference approval.

'Miss Ruth' had known just what to do. She'd seen heartache before and knew not to take it personally. "The baby needs quiet hands and warm milk," she'd told the caseworker. "I can do that. Lemar too—he's a steady boy."

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So she cleared the sewing room and brought in a bassinet. She set routines, fixed hot meals, put peppermint oil in the vaporizer when the baby fussed. Lemar helped after school, never complained, even when he missed picture day.

The social worker came by every week, always acknowledging Lemar first. “That boy is your anchor!” The house always smelled like Sunday dinner. “The healing’s gonna take time,” Miss Ruth had said more than once, “but love’s got a longer reach than grief.”

Now that time had come. This morning, while Tanya dressed in the back bedroom, Miss Ruth found Lemar adjusting the cushions just so on the sofa. She watched him a moment, arms crossed over her apron.

“You been carryin’ a lot on them young shoulders, haven’t you?” she said gently.

Lemar shrugged. “Didn’t feel right to stop.”

“It was never yours to carry alone, baby. But you did good.” She walked over and gave his arm a squeeze. “Your mama’s strong, but you—you helped keep the door open ‘til she could come back through it.”

Lemar’s face flushed. He nodded, eyes on the floor. “I didn’t want her baby to forget her.”

Miss Ruth smiled, eyes glinting. “He won’t. And neither will she.”

Now, Tanya was here, her baby was here, safe and cared for by gramma. *Her baby!* Swaddled in a blanket the color of dawn, eyes closed, mouth soft as a peach blossom. The moment stretched as the social worker lowered the child into Tanya’s arms.

“You ready?” Miss Ruth asked, her hands clasped in hopeful prayer.

Tanya nodded. Her hands didn’t tremble anymore, and her mind was clear from rehab. Lemar ran to the kitchen to get his cell phone for a selfie. His heart lifted a little higher, his mom was home. It was like their whole family in place again, with a new brother!

“You home now,” Tanya whispered to her baby.

# Opening Move

The girl in the indigo kimono—Rin—lifted the pawn between thumb and forefinger. The wood was cool, worn smooth by generations of fingers that had paused here, just so, before committing to the board's geometry. Across from her, Aya's lashes cast feather-shadows on her cheeks. They'd played this game since childhood, when their moves were reckless as spring rain. But today, the air smelled of pine resin and impending autumn.

Rin had returned from Kyoto last week. Aya hadn't asked about the university, the betrothal talks. Some things were better said in the language of knights and bishops.

The pawn clicked into place.

"You hesitated," Aya murmured.

Rin's fingers tensed. Last night, after supper at home, her mother had unrolled a suitor's portrait—*"Good bloodline, a house in Kamakura."* The man's painted smile looked like a Noh mask left too long in the sun.

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Rin had learned to pour tea without spilling a drop, to bow at the correct depth, to listen without interrupting. She had worn obedience like a second kimono. But lately, it fit her like damp silk—clinging, insistent. She did not want to inherit a house in Kamakura. She wanted questions without answers, poems without subjects, mornings that began with wind in the quince.

Her genius, so skilled at arranging peonies in silence, itched for the clatter of train stations, for foreign faces, for laughter too loud in quiet places. She looked at Aya—not the move, but the girl who always let her win—and for the first time, wanted to run.

*"Do you ever think about—"* Rin began.

Aya waved her hand. *"It's still your move."*

The pawn between them gleamed like a tiny, polished skull.

Beyond the shoji, the garden's maple trembled. A twig snapped. Aya's gaze flicked to the garden sliding door. For a heartbeat, she swore that she saw the silhouette of a monk, his bald head tilted as if eavesdropping, his eyes blinded with desire. Then—gone. Or was it the dream she had of being shadowed in the alleyways by an unknown suitor?

Rin wondered if Aya, too, remembered the winter they'd played blindfolded, giggling as their pieces strayed into enemy territory. Now, the rules of life seemed immutable.

Aya's hand hovered—then she mirrored Rin's move, a perfect echo.

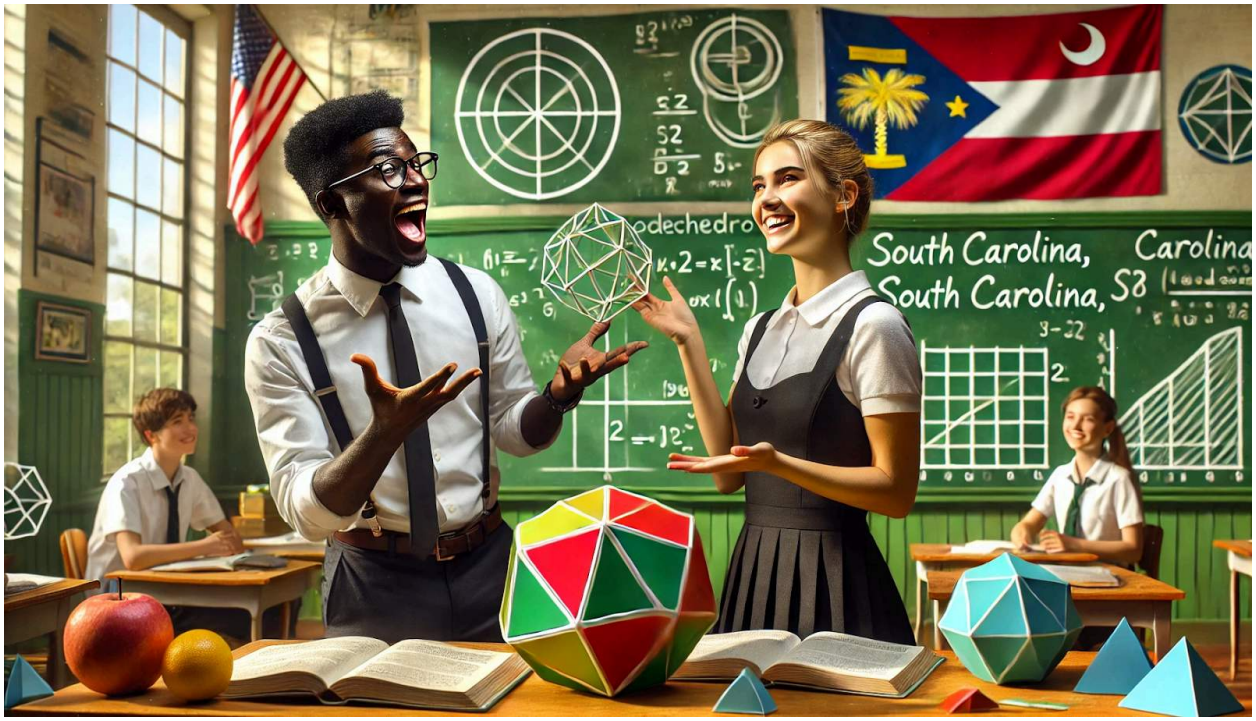
"Always copying me," Rin teased, voice lighter than she felt.

"No," said Aya. "I'm letting you lead."

The shoji breathed gold. Somewhere, a cicada rasped its dirge. The game stretched before them, a bridge of ivory and ebony, and for a moment, Rin could pretend they had all the time in the world.

*shōji no kage ni / furugo no oto / ichi no fu*
*(In the shoji's light / the sound of an old game / one pawn moves)*

# Patterns




If you want to know the truth, I never liked Tuesdays. Everything stupid happens on a Tuesday. That was the day the new girl showed up in geometry. Jody — that was her name — transferred in from some place in Raleigh, but she talked like she was born in Paris. Hair all slicked back like a knife, and a scarf. You never know with these people.

Anyway, she walked in with her notebook clutched to her chest like it was going to save her life. Sat right up front, too. That was the first offense. Nobody decent wants to sit up front. You only do that if you're a suck-up, or those "I want to learn everything" types.

The funny thing was, Mr. Ellis — that's our geometry teacher — he didn't care. He was one of those Black guys who don't have to try hard to get you to listen. Like he could just walk into the room, say, "Let's do circles," and everyone would sit up straight.

Anyway, this Tuesday from hell, he's got us all building these paper dodecahe*douches* — twelve faces, twenty corners, or something like that. I don't know. I was half-listening and drawing a dragon on the side of mine.

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Then Andy — who usually smells like boiled eggs and Axe body spray — suddenly figures something out.  He holds up his weird little math soccer ball — all straws, paper, and glue, but pretty nice, I have to admit. “I get it,” he says.

And Mr. Ellis looks at him and goes, “Yes. You do, Andy.”

For a second, nobody said anything. Kevin scrolled on his phone. Jody blinked, pencil hovering, like maybe she’d already forgotten what she was learning. I wonder what she’s thinking about. I’ll have to get up beside her after class.

Mr. Ellis turned to the board and started talking, but not like a teacher trying to fill time. “Symmetry,” he said, slow and clear, “is the language of belonging. Of balance. Of things that fit, even when they look strange at first.”

He tapped the chalk line he’d drawn earlier — something about tessellations or Platonic solids. I wasn’t really tracking, ’cause now I’m thinking what I’ll say to Jody.

“It’s not just shapes,” Mr. Ellis went on. “It’s music. Faces. Trees. The way lightning forks. Even how you solve a fight. Patterns are everywhere.”

Then he showed us this Mandelbrot video.

Nobody moved. The video went down and down and down into this acid-test math. Annie P. didn’t throw anything like usual. I didn’t say anything snarky. It was like something landed in the room — quiet but real — and we all felt it at the same time.

Where does he get this stuff!? I’m totally checking out Mandelbrot art after school.

Sometimes I think school isn’t really about learning anything, only ‘read and repeat’. More about finding out who you are when something finally makes sense. Or doesn’t. Who notices. Who doesn’t. Who knows? Who uses dodecahedrons anyway? NASA?

Well — maybe, if you’re lucky, someone like Mr. Ellis teaches you how to see the world.

Oops, there’s the bell! *And I know exactly what I’m going to say to Jody!*

# When the Day Comes

Every town has its secrets, and Maplewick's was the hill.

Not the one marked on tourist maps with a plaque about founding fathers or skirmishes past. This was Birch Street — closed each winter by snowfall and tradition. It wound steeply down from the bluffs to the frozen lake, flanked by colonial houses whose dormers blinked with candlelight and wreaths. On snowy nights, the hill belonged to the children. And the children belonged to the hill.

The sledding began as soon as the plows gave up. Parents posted folding sawhorses and reflective signs: "STREET CLOSED — SLEDDERS ONLY." No one questioned it. Snowfall here came early and stayed late, and Birch Street remembered.

At the top of the hill, by the last mailbox, stood a figure in a fur-collared coat, one hand resting on the wooden railing like a conductor awaiting the cue. That was Mrs. Halberd. She'd lived in the same yellow clapboard for 72 years, longer than anyone else in Maplewick. Some swore she knew every sled by its scrape, every child by their squeal.

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She never shouted, but her word was rule: “One at a time,” “Heads up!” and most importantly, “Wait for the light.”

The light was a string of sleigh bells hung across the road, swaying in the wind. When they chimed — usually on their own, as if by some magic known only to weather and memory — the next child would fly down the grade.

It wasn’t about speed, though there was plenty. It was the moment just before, when your boots dug in and the world narrowed. It was breathless. Stars wheeling. Cold through your mittens. And then, laughter.

One evening — Christmas Eve — the snow was slow in coming. The hill waited like a held breath. Then, just past dusk, the flakes began.

“It’s coming,” whispered Mira Tomlinson, six years old and certain.

“I can ride with you,” said her brother Luke, who’d once chipped a tooth at the bottom curve. He grinned, front gap still wide as a smile.

But Mira shook her head. *“I’m going alone!”*

The hill hushed in approval. The grownups sipped cider from travel mugs. Kids wriggled with impatience. Mrs. Halberd tied a tartan scarf tight and nodded. Then the bells rang.

Mira launched. The world went white and wind. Lights blurred. The sled bounced, then soared. Her shriek echoed off chimney smoke. And then — down at the bottom — a flash of red: lanterns lit, two volunteers waving her through the curve and into the hay-baled finish near the lake’s edge. When she stood, arms lifted in triumph, her parents clapped.

Afterward, the children came for cookies, cocoa, and stories. A table had been set near Mrs. Halberd’s steps. Each house on Birch Street had brought something: cider steeped with cinnamon, oatmeal scotchies, gingerbread boys with candy eyes. Paper lanterns lined the walkway, glowing like sugarplums.

An older man, visiting from out of state, said to a couple beside him, “Looks like the children have remembered how to have fun again.”

# The One with the Mummy Costume

*Ding-dong!*

Julie opened the door to a trio of high schoolers — one inflatable T-Rex, one neon skeleton, and one girl in a cardboard box that read “404: Costume Not Found.”

“Nice,” Julie grinned, dropping candy bars into each outstretched bag. “Creative coding. Bonus points.”

“Thank you, adult human,” said the T-Rex through its foggy mesh mouth before the group shuffled down the porch steps, laughter trailing like fog.

It was almost full dark now, that soft blue hour where porch lights bloomed like stars and the leaves on Main Street crackled like old vinyl underfoot. The air smelled of kettle corn, mulch, and someone's fireplace down the block. Somewhere a Bluetooth speaker played “Monster Mash” from inside a hollowed-out pumpkin.

Inside, the twins were getting into costume. Sort of.

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“You can’t both be Wednesday Addams,” Julie called from the front hall. “That’s not the deal we made.”

“Her mask is crooked,” one twin shouted.

“You stole my tights,” the other whined.

Julie smiled. They were thirteen now. Their preschool sweet plastic pumpkin buckets had long been replaced by pillowcases and candy attitude. But they were still here — still willing to dress up and stalk the sidewalks. That was worth everything.

She turned back toward the porch and leaned against the doorframe, watching the street fill with all sizes of monsters. A tiny fireman with a hat too big for his head. A cluster of bumblebees under a blanket, moving like a six-legged creature. One mom stood by the curb sipping cider from a thermos, snapping photos as her daughter ran up a driveway in sparkly antennae. Another group of teens loitered by the lamppost.

Julie remembered another Halloween — maybe six years back now — when she'd made the mistake of trying matching DIY mummy costumes for the girls. They’d spent half the night tripping and the other half laughing. The twins had been seven then, wide-eyed and half thrilled, half terrified by every animatronic costume decoration in the street.

*Ding-dong!*

Julie opened the door again. A boy stood there, maybe seventeen, tall and awkward in a hand-wrapped mummy getup — too much gauze, not enough visibility.

“Nice,” she said. “I did the mummy with them one year. Total disaster.”

He pushed his bandages back just enough to grin. “I know,” he said. “You showed me that picture last week. I’m dating Nora.” He stuck out a gauzed hand, “Todd….”

From behind, one of the twins shrieked, “Why are you talking to our *MOM!?”*

Julie handed him a Snickers bar. “Continuity,” she said, and laughed. Todd nodded thanks, waved to the twins with a BOO!, then ran back down the walk, unspooling.

# The Coin in the Mist

The first snowflake hit her cheek just as they stepped out of the Fremont Library.

“Did you feel that?” Shelley tilted her face upward, lips parted, eyes catching a flurry that hadn’t even been forecast. The street lamps lit the flakes like ash from a distant fire.

“I put in a request,” said Thatcher, brushing snow off the shoulders of his battered coat. He was a house painter by trade, but a seasonal optimist by instinct. He kept showing up at her library reference desk until she agreed to dinner. That was four months ago.

“I thought this was supposed to be our year for Christmas in the Alps,” she teased.

They laughed. Seattle was the sort of city where you packed chains in the trunk but never used them. But tonight, the snow was settling on car hoods and bicycle baskets like it meant it. They walked a few blocks in silence — before spotting the child.

The girl stood outside under a neon market sign, wearing a woolen hat with a pom-pom that drooped like a sleepy bird. No adults in sight. Just her and the falling snow.

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Shelley crouched. “Sweetie? You okay?”

“I went to the store for my Mom,” the girl whispered. “I think I’m lost.”

The girl remembered her address, so Thatcher dialed up a map, while Shelley talked to her. It was only a few blocks. They found the house. The girl’s grey-haired mother answered. She wore a blue shawl and hugged the girl so tightly, her hat popped off.

“Come in,” she said breathlessly. “You must come in. I make tea, to say thank you.”

The house was small and Old World. The tea smelled like fennel and lemon peel. “I am oracle,” the woman said, pouring. “You two—” she pointed to Shelley— “will have a crossing. A star cross. Much difficulty. But you find what you need.”

Then she reached into her pocket and placed a small silver dime on the table.

“Take. It help you find you way.”

With the fresh snow, they booked a place in the Cascades. A long drive. They left after breakfast and arrived at the festive village and winter market by noon. The sky was pale as porcelain. Mount Rainier loomed like a silent god. Stalls lined both sides of a country path, glowing like lanterns. A man with hands like hams was working a wooden press.

Shelley tugged a mitten off to sip her cup of hot cider. “Italy next year?” she shrugged.

“Let’s see what the coin says,” Thatcher reached beside her ear, and showed the coin.

Shelley leaned in close, pressing her nose to his, “The coin says, yes, we will!”

A child watching beside them gasped and clapped. “You’re a magician! Now do me!”

Thatcher bent low, reached behind the boy’s ear, then pressed the coin into his hand, with an exaggerated magician’s bow. “And now the magic coin is yours!”

The boy’s face was ecstatic. His fingers closed around it, turning to show his mother.

“Look, Mom!! *I gotta magic coin!”*

# In Maple Sugar

Every town in Vermont has one: a store that smells like old rope and cinnamon, with creaky floorboards, a pot-bellied stove, and a clerk who's been there so long she knows what kind of candy you liked in 3rd grade. In Mapleton, that was Maynard's General & Confectionery, and on February 14th, it transformed into something almost mythic.

There were red ribbons in the windows, balloon hearts swaying from the ceiling fan, and a tiny stuffed cupid that shot rubber arrows at passing customers. The air was thick with sugar and anticipation. Merritt Foster, retired postmaster, stepped into the shop that morning with a tin box under his arm and snow in his eyebrows. His wife Adele trailed behind, stomping her boots to keep the store floor from getting slick.

"You're too late," called Mrs. Maynard from behind the counter. "The goods shelf's full."

"We're not here for goods shelf," Adele said. "We're here to see if maple candy still sells." She opened the tin to show sixteen maple-sugar hearts — hand-poured, shaped in the old tin molds they kept in the shed. Each heart had a different letter pressed into it:

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❤️B❤️E❤️ ❤️S❤️W❤️E❤️E❤️T!

Mrs. Maynard raised an eyebrow. “Cute. Vintage-y. So the sugar shack’s still standing? She started doo-doo-it’ing *‘Oh sugar, ahh honey honey, you are my candy girl…’*

“Had a porcupine’d moved in,” Merritt grinned.“Evicted him last week.”

They left the maple sugar hearts by the register with a sign: Local Love – $2.25 each.

Merritt and Adele had been sugaring since before Frankie Lymon died. And even though the original Foster Sugarhouse now sat lopsided behind a subdivision of second homes, they still tapped the trees every February,  for themselves and kin. They still boiled the sap over fire and used the old thermometer with the mercury bubble inside.

Outside, the sleet had passed into sun, and the sidewalks glistened like candied fruit. The town clock struck eleven. The day would warm just enough to make your boots leak.

“I give it until noon before some kid spends his last $2.25 on one,” Adele said.

“You think they’ll like the taste?”

“They’ll never forget it,” she replied.

By closing time, only one heart remained in the tin, and Mrs. Maynard, who had eaten the “B,” declared them "intensely nostalgic and faintly horrifying — just like love.”

Merritt and Adele returned before Maynards closed. They didn’t ask for the money. They took the last candy heart — the T — and left a note on the tin: SWEET LOVE.

They walked the long way home through Mapleton’s back streets, past the old mill, past the library where Adele once tutored, and past the wooden bridge where Merritt first told her she was too good for him. “You know,” he said, brushing snow from her shoulders, “if I hadn’t married you, I’d probably be dead in a ditch somewhere.”

Tomorrow, they’d fire up the evaporator again. The sap would collect in cups. The trees would grow taller. Then just like that, the wind picked up — sweet, old, full of Spring.

# Sekiu

Entry: 14th September, Near Cape Flattery, 48.3° N, 124.3° W by the sighting of Venus

We came to anchor under the lee of the tall island, having seen the smoke of a shore fire drifting inland with the morning mist. The shore here was of dark sand and piled drift, where the forest came down steeply as if the trees themselves had stepped into the surf.

At first light, while our men still dozed below and the tide creaked beneath the hull, I slipped into the pinnace and had four hands row me ashore to look for fresh water. The fog held close to the skin, and the only sound was the slow wheeze of the sea and the far, bark-like call of some creature I did not know. As I rounded a salt-crusted log, I found myself not ten paces from a black bear, hunched in ripe berries found above the strand.

He had nosed well into them and upon hearing my approach, pulled free and stood with a snort. His fur was matted with brine and sand, and he looked at me without alarm, without challenge. Simply looked — long enough that I felt measured and weighed. Then he slipped into the impossibly dense woodlands, and fierce-thorned saw-leaved brush.

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Later it was the Chinook who found us first, not we them — a long canoe sliding out from behind a stone pinnacle, carved at both ends and gliding low with sea weight. They bore gifts, it seemed, but were dressed as warriors, perhaps in warning.

One held up his arm, clutching dried kelp strung with what we thought were small pearls. Only later, through signs and smiles, did I learn they were eggs — the herring's offering, gathered on fronds, smoked, then gifted like salt. Another man, his hands stained with alder smoke, offered a strip of what they called *k'iist's'ił*, a hard-dried salmon so red it shone like a cut ruby in the lantern light.

We traded an axe for a barrel full, a dear bargain by value, but rich in understanding that we must replenish our stores. That night, the fog rolled thick and the men went silently ashore. We had not just seen the coast — we had landed on it. We camped that evening beneath towering firs, their boughs sagging with damp like monks in prayer. The native camp still sheltered nearby — a fire with a delicate lattice of split salmon hung above it, flesh curled and glistening, translucent in the last of the light.

The scent carried something unnameable: a mingling of brine, woodsmoke, and a memory I could not place. One of our younger men, Carrow, gestured yes to taste the offered strip and remarked it was *'of the sea, yes, but also of days lost to winter.'*

Later, as I walked the stony edge of the inlet, the woman stood ankle-deep in surf runup, speaking low to the child as he tossed pebbles. She did not look at me, and kept raking up cockle shellfish in sandy patches. I made no move to approach. Instead I watched as the fog closed gently around them, as if the land itself refused to let go of the sea.

It occurred to me that perhaps it was not we who were discovering this place at all, but that we were being quietly observed, measured, and remembered — not as masters, but as some new form of passing creation. Our fire burned low. The night closed in.

*sea walks through the pines*
*cedar smoke ghosts the salmon—*
*quahogs bake in the coals.*

# Come As You Are

The art room smelled like the sharp, waxy promise of new crayons—like September was a fresh notebook, and they were all just waiting for someone to scribble in it. Sunlight bled through the windows, lazy and gold, catching the dust motes like they were secrets floating between them.

Lena's brush hovered over her Tibetan flag-ish watercolor, but she wasn't painting. She was not-looking at Dylan. Not-looking so hard, her cheeks blushed.

Dylan—Quinault wool hat, Nordic wool sweater that smelled like his dad's cedar closet—was also not-looking at Lena. Instead, he was pretending to be deeply invested in the smudge of blue-on-blue-on-blue something tragic-drowning arctic seashore he was sketching, like if he scratched away long enough, it might turn into something *'buoyant'*.

His knee bounced suddenly under the table. Once. Twice. A nervous tremor, like his body was a live wire and someone had plugged him in. Lena was almost looking up. There was a rustling motion, then a body imposed itself between them. Jason.

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Jason was Lena's cousin, her self-appointed guardian. He leaned between them, arms bracketing the art desk like opposing swords. His glare at Dylan was pure: 'I will cut you for breathing her air.'

Lena exhaled with a snort. "Jason. Move. You're looming."

Dylan smirked, focusing on his sketch. Cobalt blue would be good here, short switching pencil strokes. His left hand fingers tapped once. Twice. A subtle drumbeat that maybe Lena would notice, and look.

Mrs. Langläufer drifted by, like a distracted ghost. "Everything alright here?"

"Perfect,..." Lena lied, brushing Mrs. Langläufer off. Langläufer? What kind of name is that? She laughed softly, '...Mrs. Frankenfurter."

Their teacher turned to Jason with a 'get back to your desk' look. Jason's jaw flexed. "We're discussing Lena's Tibetan composition. So beautiful in her proportions!"

Mrs. Langläufer wandered off, *'visual proprioception is in effective emotional layering of art,'* — then clipped her elbow on a table edge and muttered, *"Scheisse!"*

Lena laughed—an actual laugh this time— then she looked up and smiled at Dylan!

He turned his arctic artpaper toward her, revealing a tiny sketch drawn in the corner: a mountain, a Tibetan flag, and a girl standing alone, holding the flag planted on the peak.

"You forgot the prayer wheels," Lena said.

Dylan shrugged. "I was …." He lost it. Lena went back to working on her snow lions.

The bell was gonna ring soon, he cringed. This moment would be lost. Jason would drag Lena off to lunch, both of them vanishing into the cafeteria swarm. He'd go back to being just another freshman stranger in a strange land.

But for now? *'Nice to meet you, where you been? I can show you wonderful things!'* raced through his mind, surging like spring breakup on the Yukon River.

# Ding Dong Ding

The summer I turned seven, we had a big garden patch, all of us. I had my spot, near the back fence, but it was mine. I dug it with a bent spoon and watered it with a jelly jar, and when the radishes came up—red and round and proud—it felt I'd grown treasure!

Mom helped me bundle them with kitchen string, and I made a sign from a cereal box:

RADISHIS 25¢ A BUNCH.

[I knew how to spell, mostly, but she let it slide.]

I set up my crate out by the sidewalk at the curb, like a real market salesman. People smiled and walked by, but then this one lady came—lace gloves and veil hat. 'The Old Teacher Lady.' She bent down, her knees straight, and pointed to a bunch.

"I only have a dime," she said, like she was a baby bird. I looked at her—then at the sign. I should've said no. But something about the way she held that dime, like it was her last coin. I gave her the radishes anyway.

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*Only, she wouldn't give it up!* She gripped it so tight I had to pry her fingers open with both hands. I can still feel her fingers—brittle as chicken bones, but stubborn as bark.

That week, the knife sharpener man came. We heard him coming—his huge wagon wheels squeaking, big whetstone spinning, and that soft bell: *'ding… dong… ding…'* It almost made it feel holy, like some bishop was passing by in a black Buick.

"Go get him our knives," Mom said, wiping her hands on her apron.

I ran out barefoot. My pet frog Lester was tucked in my overalls pocket. I call him Les.

I handed over the blades, careful not to poke myself. That's when Les decided it was time to stretch his legs—jumped right out of my shirt onto the ground!

The old ding-dong man flinched, shouted something that sounded like *'Oy gevalt!'*, and stomped on Lester. Just like that! His big stinky boot. *Smoosh!*

He muttered something under his breath, shook his head at me like I was the bad guy, and went back to grinding. Then he wanted his money. *What about Les!?*

Mom made lemonade after, like she always did, and sat with me on the back step.

"Some people have money," she summed up, "and some don't. And some folks don't have any softness left in them either … at all. That's just life, honey."

I nodded, watching the ants crawling through the cracks. "But he killed Lester!"

Dad came home smelling like hand soap and pommade. I told him the whole thing, the dime lady's claws, the knife man's boots, Les that had tried to leap free, but died.

He listened without interrupting, then leaned back in his chair.

"Well," he said, "next time someone smooshes your frog, you kick them in their knee!"

Mom gave Dad a shush look and said, "Don't listen to your Father."

Still, I'm thinkin' about old ding-dong-ding man, for next time! Kerpow! *Run, Les!*

# The Porch Light Left On

It was said, in some old library folio, that the house had burned twice since, and been rebuilt three times. The bayou never told what it saw, and neither did the oaks.

Claire and Whit came back on a Sunday, the kind where the air smells of wet earth and the first blooms make everything feel forgiven. The house had belonged to her grandmother, and her grandmother's mother before that, but it had passed through many hands—Yankee bankers, New Orleans lawyers, and a carpetbagger who claimed he won the land title 'fair and square' playing Faro on a Natchez riverboat.

They walked the garden trail, just re-graveled, with his hand on her back and her eyes drinking in the camellias. Whit had a habit of humming when he was content, and Claire's laugh came easy. The money had come from a shipping concern out of Mobile, clean on paper, not so clean in practice. No one asked about that.

But it wasn't their planned wedding that concerned Claire—it was the letter, found behind a loose board upstairs, written in her great-grandmother's hand. It said:

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*If the lantern ever swings in windless air, it means The General's still here, watching. Don't marry a man who can't see it.*

She hadn't told Whit about the lantern on the back porch, the one that swayed gently at dusk two nights before the wedding.

Claire had asked Whit later, casually, if he had noticed it moving.

"Nope," he'd said, 'When was that?"

Claire didn't told him about the second letter either.

It had fallen from the lining of the hope chest, brittle as moth wing. She found it on the morning, one day before their wedding, written in the same sharp cursive:

*"The General was kind, once. But kind men can be cruel, too, when they forget how to see. If the light swings at midnight and he can see it, you found a good man."*

This night, she sat on the back porch long after Whit had gone to bed, tired from anxiety. She watched the lantern move—slow and sure—as if someone had given it a gentle push. The air was still. The bayou didn't whisper.

Whit stepped out behind her in the darkness, barefoot, carrying two mugs of warm tea. One mug was chipped. The kind her grandmother never threw away.

"Can't sleep? You left the porch light on," he said, his voice scratchy with sleep.

Claire nodded. "Do you see it moving?"

He blinked. Tilted his head.

"Yeah. Weird. Guess there's a ghost," he laughed and sat next to her on the porch swing.

Claire turned to look at him. Just for a moment. The sky behind him had started to pale into dawn—the rosy color of promise.

"Maybe, … maybe," she thought to herself, and sipped her tea with a cherubic smile.

# The Last Garden

Mornings were her domain. Before the dew dried, before the robins quieted, she was already outside—barefoot sometimes, if the grass wasn't too cold, humming snatches of 1970s radio hits without distinction. She moved with purpose and a kind of humble flair, snapping open seed packets like lost letters, calling the dog not to trample her cosmos.

"You don't plant to impress," she said, holding a sage start. "You plant to remember." Her fingers, always nicked and soil-stained, handled each rootling like an heirloom.

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Ginny loved the stubborn herbs most—the ones that came back year after year without complaint. Even in town, people would stop her at the co-op: *What's your trick for those dahlias you're growing?* And she'd laugh, saying it wasn't a trick at all. "I listen to 'em."

She had planted the garden in neat rows before she fell ill. No one could match her early spring energy—seeds sorted in tidy paper envelopes, trays, rows marked with string and stakes, and her hair tied neatly back as she bent to coax life from the still-chilled earth. By June, the first lettuce had come in, snap peas had begun to bush, the scarlet runner beans to climb, the winter squash trailing out and tomatoes were starting to leaf out.

Then came the quiet, with her sudden passing.

That summer became his vigil, silent weeding and caring, thoughts spoken only to himself. Adison could not bear to lose a single plant that Ginny had sown. Instead, he rose each morning and stepped into her garden. Watered the squash when the sun grew harsh. Propped the tomatoes with taller poles as they reached skyward. Whispered apologies to the drooping marigolds when he forgot them for a day.

It was not grief that moved Adison so much as duty—the sort of tender, aching duty that makes meaning of long days after a loved one's passing.

By September, the garden bloomed like it had never done before. Blossoms burst in wild joy along the picket fence. Cucumbers curled in shady corners like sleeping cats. The zucchini pushed up then laid out like fat hogs. And the pumpkins—her favorite—grew grotesquely distorted. Ginny called them 'Henry II's' resting on beds of straw like kings.

Neighbors remarked how fine it all looked, and Adison only smiled.

"She planned it and planted the seeds for it," he said. "I'm only keeping her promise."

And in the hush of an early autumn afternoon, as leaves turned to flame and the air grew cool enough for a sweater, he walked the garden again, to remember how he and Ginny had harvested their bounty each year together, and carefully put them up in jars.

Somewhere between the roses and the rosemary, he imagined her there still—apron dusted with earth, eyes crinkled in approval, saying, as she always did: "Hi, honey."

Adison looked lost, half-smiling, then shook his head. "Hi, Gin," he whispered back.

# First Bite of the Final Year

When the robot probes returned to Mars Base Camp Seven, they brought back ‘seeds’—caught eons past after drifting in the solar wind, then embedded in the silica grooves of ancient Martian canyon rocks, dug out by the probe arms and returned for analysis.

The silicon life-form bloomed in days into a sort of hovering orb. Its luminescent face pulsed like a warning heart. Or an apple. At the breakfast table, they joked about it:

“It’s staring at me,” said Coyle, poking it with his finger. “I think it wants me to eat it.” He reached over playfully with a spoonful of cereal, “Open wide!” then laughed.

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“It seems to be thinking,” said Dr. Rhys. “But it’s already bored of us,” she concluded. Cynthia in civilian life, she was Command Supervisor for their mission probe laboratory.

In the red dawn of the station’s last morning, the others had gone into a crater left when a returning probe had exploded, chasing fragments to find the cause. Cynthia sat alone at her console, watching the system monitors trace blue fluorescent trails, keeping an eye on their luminescent apple-orb hovering above the floor — and slowly *rising*.

The ‘seed’ hadn’t so much bloomed into fruit, as awakened, it seemed to her — not organic, not synthetic, but something even in between. A hovering, softly pulsing orb, projecting itself as a glowing ‘apple’ carved from her memory. It floated there slightly above the table. Watching her. Trying to tell her something, she felt. What?

Their Thunderforge AI monitoring system crackled, *‘Houston, we have an anomaly on our space telescope. Please advise.’* Dr. Rhys sat up and dialed in the image, clicking x10, then x1000, then held the back of her hand to her mouth to stifle her cry.

On the screen, Earth turned like a marbled dream — and then, into a blooming wound, continents peeling open in slow motion like petals. Oceans geysered skyward in steam.

A white light broke the clouds, raying out in lines brighter than sun or reason, flooding space and the station’s monitor screen, blinding the sensors. *Earth was going nova!*

“Return to the station!” Cynthia screamed in the comm-relay. “*GET BACK HERE!”* Then she knew. The orb sensed their future. The ‘apple’ image was an unspoken glyph, an invocation, so they’d have time to mentally prepare for their end. But they had made jokes about it, then gone off to play SubVerge and MineCraft.

She ran out to watch for Earth’s nova shock wave, warning the others on her comm. In the probe’s crater, the astronaut they dubbed Prophet Daniel stood and bellowed, his helmet thrown aside. *“In the Beginning the Earth was formless and void, darkness lay over the surface of the deep!”* he screamed Genesis into the dust-laden choking wind.

In the station laboratory, the silicon ‘apple’ slowed to stillness, silent. Then it began to resonate, gleaming in fire, like a beckoning star, for the last living human eyes to see.

# The Founding Tree

The plums always came in August, a purple softening before the fields turned gold.

Aaron steadied the bamboo pole in his weathered hands, squinting against the sun, as Daniel held his basket ready beneath the branches of the plum tree, planted back years ago. One careful knock, and the fruit began to fall—quietly, like blessings.

The old tree leaned a little now, as elders do. It stood apart from the neat rows of newer trees planted in recent years. This one bore smaller fruit, more skin than flesh, but no one thought to cut it down. It had been the first, grown from a pit brought over in a young man's coat pocket. They said the entire orchard remembered it. When the breeze passed through, the newer trees bent toward it slightly, as if listening.

Aaron gave the branch another thump. Three more plums tumbled down.

Daniel caught one mid-air. "Got it!" he grinned, face alight. It wasn't the sweetness of the plums he would remember later, but the sound they made landing in the basket. The dusty earth beneath his boots. The way Daniel looked at him now, with quiet trust.

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As they worked, Aaron's mind wandered, as it often did now. He was back again in memory to the summer's earlier work—all the local men gathered to raise the great timber skeleton of the Riehl family's new barn over in Quarryville. The smell of fresh-cut oak, the slap of boots on dry boards, the lift and creak of beams rising toward the sky.

Daniel had helped—carrying chisels, augers, lengths of pegging stock. Aaron had made sure of it: no shirking, no idling too long by the long lunch table where women laid out tomato pie and fresh butter on thick brown bread. The Riehl girls were always nearby.

Daniel had listened. He'd learned to cut a clean mortise, to set a tenon with the maul, to fit wood like puzzle and prayer. His child's hands had hurt. His eyes had gleamed. Now, beneath this ancient plum tree, Aaron could see it again—the stretch toward manhood.

He thumped the pole gently once more. The branch shivered. Plums fell soft, like little thunders in the hush between words. A beeswax light shimmered through the leaves.

They worked until the basket was nearly full. Daniel sat back in the grass, eating one of the split plums. His face puckered with delight and a hint of sweet surprise.

Daniel tossed a stone toward the fence and missed. "Grandfather planted this one?"

"No," Aaron said. "His uncle, I think. But your great-grandmother made the first batch of plum butter in the kettle behind the house. Kept the recipe in a folded scrap of Bible paper. That kettle's still in the barn."

Daniel nodded. Then after a moment: "Will you show me how to make it?"

Aaron looked at the boy—how he sat easily in the orchard's shade. "Sure, champ!"

"Will the orchard always be ours?" Daniel wondered as they stood to go.

Aaron shrugged. He looked out over the fields, how they folded into the hills like pleats in old cloth. The fields needed to be harvested. The roofs needed to be mended. The horses to re-shod, and the buggy wheel that wobbled too much.

"Tomorrow, we will begin work again. But for tonight, it's plum butter with Daniel!"

# The Binding Cord

These were the lean years, the 1850s—when cornmeal mush simmered three nights a week in a black iron pot swung above coals. Sugar was eighteen cents a pound, tea a luxury no one asked for. Children went barefoot until the frost cracked their heels. Wheat fetched a quarter a bushel. You learned early. Every child had a duty.

When the wagons began to roll west, many followed—not for gold, but for fertile ground. Bottomland in grass and forage and forest to feed them and grow their future. Nebraska, the Indian Territories, far-off Oregon—they sounded like salvation in a tin cup. Nathan Warnock, wife Nancy and their family decided to go, leaving their stump farm behind.

She packed the butter churn, the pickling crocks, the quilts sewn with her mother's hand still visible in the tiny cross-stitches. All of it nested inside the wagon's covered belly, lashed tight beside dried beans, cornmeal, a water barrel and hope. They left Missouri with twenty-one wagons, in the Hastert party, and followed the rivers west, prairie in front, singing hymns at dusk and drinking muddy coffee in the morning chill.

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The morning was hot early, dew burned off though the sun had barely risen. The trail funneled tight where the buffalo grass grew shoulder-high, green-gold and dense as brushwood. A wagon ahead slowed and stopped—lame mule, they said. The train veered off, single-file now, hunting purchase in the tall buffalo grass.

Ethan, just eleven, wiry and sun-browned, sat tall on the bench, reins gripped like a man's. His mother was beside him on the bench, his father walking beside, guiding them around the stalled Robbins wagon. They didn't see the rock. But hidden in the tall grass, it caught the rim of the left rear wheel with a crack so sharp it sounded like gunfire.

Their wagon jolted. Nancy grabbed the seat edge. Nathan shouted, "*Whoa, whoa*!" The oxen bellowed and stamped, flanks steaming in the morning heat. Ethan stared ahead, frozen, holding the reins. "Axle's done," Nathan said, already moving to the back of the wagon. But it wasn't the axle. The rock impact had split the wheel hub clean through. That wheel sagged inward now like a drunk leg. "We're not going anywhere today."

The wagon train was still visible—strung out along the path, some slowing, some not. They saw Mrs. Holtz waving bye, then the wagon trail boss on horseback rode back. He looked at the broken wheel, ran his hand across his sunburnt neck, then said, "We can't wait. You'll have to take your chances for a wheel with the next party come' along."

"Can we fix it?" Ethan asked, as Nancy helped his sister Audrey down from the wagon. Nathan didn't answer right away. He was crouched, fingers running along the splintered wood, feeling the failure in it. "We'll try." Audrey held her corn-husk doll, watching.

"I'll boil water," Nancy said. It was what you said when things needed doing.

By noon the wagon train was a smudge on the horizon. Her husband and the boy tried everything—splicing wood, wetting leather, bracing with iron straps. None of it held. The sun leaned westward. That night, they lay under quilts beside the wagon. The air had cooled. Somewhere a nightbird called. The fire popped once. The stars came out, as the oxen grazed quietly. The broken wagon stood beside them like a white ghost.

The trail would wait for them.

# Farolitos

Clara did not measure the time. She simply moved. A pinch of blue corn, the rhythm of her hand against the metate stone, the low song in her throat that had no words. The boy, Pacquito, watched, his small elbow on the table's edge, his eyes following the dust motes spinning in candlelight.

Clara didn't look up from her grinding. She had been liming the blue corn since before first light, soaking it in slaked lime and rinsing it. Her hands, darkened by sun and stone, moved with memory — turning, grinding in the *metate*, turning again — as the *nixtamal* became a fine *masa* between stone and palm. The pestle, worn smooth, had belonged to her great-aunt and her great-aunt's mother before that. To make good *masa*, you needed time, salt, and someone who remembered  how.

"You smell the *nixtamal,* Pacquito?" she asked gently.

He nodded. "*Si*, it smells like rain on the *suelo*."

She smiled. "Then *bisabuela* Ana is watching us from *cielo*."

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Outside, coyotes padded into the creosote bush. The desert cooled with a soundless exhale. The man lit the last lantern, its glow flickering against the adobe wall like an old story retold, then he went inside. The smoke from the iron pot drifted up into the sky and joined the evening stars.

His grandmother used to say: the desert remembers. Not just the footsteps but the meals, the laughter, the quiet sorrows. And if you stood still long enough, even the shadows of saguaros would lean in to listen.

From the darkened trail beyond the mesquite, the soft clop of hooves echoed against the stone. Two riders appeared out of the hush, bundled in scarves and heavy wool, their sombreros wide and dust-worn. One raised a hand and called gently, "*Buenas noches*. We saw your *farolitos* from the trail — might you have water for the horses? Maybe some tortillas, if the fire is still warm?"

Clara, without hesitation, nodded and stepped to the door. "Sí, of course. Come down. There is enough."

The men dismounted slowly, their movements stiff from the long ride through the mountains. They tied the reins to a low post and brushed the dust from their sleeves as they approached the porch. The father stepped into the lantern light — and stopped.

His eyes narrowed, then widened. "Jesús… y tú, Martín? From the silver pit at El Tajo?"

There was a beat of silence, then laughter broke open like the first crack of dawn. The taller man clapped the father on the shoulder. "Dios mío, Luis, we thought you were swallowed up by that mountain."

"No," Luis said, smiling now. "Only by a quieter kind of life." He introduced them "Clara, this is Jesús y Martin, from my El Tajo days, and this is Pacquito, our son."

And they went in, past the *farolitos* and the fire, into the house made of earth and memory, where warm *tortillas* and simmering *frijoles* waited, as the child listened wide-eyed, learning stories lived in the hearts of those who had experienced them.

# Warmth of Sourdough

The flour swirled like breath in the golden light, catching in the sunbeams as if trying to become something more than dust. Miriam pressed the dough with the heel of her hand—push, fold, turn—each movement slow, certain. Little Eli watched, elbows on the table, his fingers hovering just above the roll of dough in front of him.

“We’ll start gentle,” she said, her voice low, like the crackle of a fire banked overnight. “It’s not about strength. It’s about listening and feeling.”

Eli furrowed his brow and pushed the dough. “Listening to what?”

“To what it needs,” she said simply. “You’ll feel when it’s ready. You’ll see.”

The silence stretched, filled with birdsong from the window and the warm smell from the wood stove as it was waking up in fire and ash. The sun angled through the lace curtain in golden stripes across the worn table. Outside, the breeze shifted the maple leaves, their shadows dancing over the cupboard doors.

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“Did you ever mess it up?” he asked, rolling the dough over, not looking up.

She chuckled, pushing her palms deep into the dough. “Oh, sure. First time I tried, I put in sugar, twice too much. Your grandpa pretended he liked it, that it was ‘sweet’ of me.”

She kept kneading the dough, pushing and folding, pushing and folding, and then after a moment, “I was just about your age when my grandmother taught me to bake. She said bread remembers things. That each loaf carries a little of the last.”

Eli tilted his head. “Like a memory?”

Miriam nodded. “Right. Every loaf we bake carries a bit of the one before it. And hers before that. It’s in the sourdough we save for the next baking, a piece from this dough. It rests and bubbles and grows. It’s alive in that way, for the next baking.”

She paused, watching him press down more confidently now, mirroring her rhythm.

“In the old country,” she continued, “winters were cold. No central heat. We slept in our clothes, under layers of quilts. And still frost would form on the inside of the house—on the windows, even up along the ceiling.”

Eli’s eyes widened. “Did you really do that?”

“When it was that cold, we’d wrap the sourdough bowl in cloth and sleep with it beside me. My grandmother would say, ‘That sourdough is for your tomorrow. Keep it warm!’” Miriam went on, “You didn’t take any chances. If the starter froze or got moldy and died, you had no bread. Just beans and corn pone. Tu us, our bread was everything.”

Eli looked down at his small loaf. “So sourdough remembers your grandma, and you?”

“It remembers all of us,” she said gently. “The frost, the quilts, the waiting. Even you now, with your elbows on our table.”

He smiled, suddenly proud. “I want to make bread by myself. Will it remember me?”

“It will,” she said, smiling. “If you don't forget.”

# Lo Que Sabe El Fuego (What Fire Knows)

I didn't want to get up that early. No one should be awake with the roosters, but Abuela Marisol shook my shoulder anyway, whispering, "*Vamos*, Ana. It's time."

The sun was cresting the hills when we walked outside. She had the fire going at dawn. The *horno* smoked faintly, like a sleeping volcano. Abuela tugged me closer to where she sat on a stool shaping dough. "It won't hurt you, the *horno* is just waking up."

I wish I was still in bed back in El Paso, watching cartoons, eating cereal from the box. But my parents had other plans. Some kind of family thing. "Be nice to your *abuela*."

"While we wait, let's keep busy. Go on," she said, handing me a little bundle of piñon kindling. "Bark side down. Like rungs on a ladder. Stack it over there."

I started stacking. My fingers got dusty, then smoky. The logs were scratchy, but they smelled like something good — like sap, like December.

She turned the fire with her long-handled hook, her face lit orange by the flames.

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“What are we making?” I asked.

“*Pan de horno*,” she said, simple like that. “Real bread.”

She meant the kind that could last days. The kind you wrap in cloth, not foil. I’d had it before, last year at Easter. Thick and chewy with a golden crust, heavy in your hand. She served it with beans and green chile and wiped her plate clean with it. *Soo* good!

The fire had burned down to coals. She swept them out with an old broom and a wet cloth on a stick. The inside of the *horno* looked like the moon — ash white, shimmering with the heat. She tapped it with her paddle.

“It’s ready,” she said. “You can tell by the sound.”

*‘Gramma’,* I thought. ‘You s*ure know a lot…’*

We shaped the loaves together. Hers were perfect. Mine looked kinda lopsided.

She placed them deep in the *horno*, one by one, on a paddle, with a smooth twist of the wrist. It looked like she was laying down cards. Then we waited some more.

Finally the smell changed, like something alive. Crust forming. Heat makes miracles.

She peeked in. Nodded. Used the long paddle to pull them out, golden and blistered.

She handed me one wrapped in a clean towel. “For you,” she said. “First loaf.”

I held it close. It was hot and heavy, the bottom dark, almost burned. I didn’t care.

“Does it have a name?” I asked.

Abuela raised an eyebrow.

“I mean, like… is there a name for the first loaf you ever make?”

Marisol looked at me for a moment, then smiled.

“*Sí,*” she said. “We call it ‘*tu comienzo*.’ Your beginning.”

# Mabel’s Sugar

Today I was the wind. Or maybe the string. Or maybe the small girl with cold hands and big feelings and a kite with a tail made from my mom’s old scarves. The purple one that smells like her perfume even though she says it’s just soap.

Grace said I was being poetic again. “You’re just Mabel,” she said, “and that kite’s going to dive-bomb Lil’ Henry if you don’t keep it straight.” But I was already laughing too hard and Lil’ Henry was running in circles with his string all tangled like spaghetti, yelling that he could *fly it by himself,* thank you very much. He always says ‘thank you very much’ when he’s being stubborn, which is most of the time.

It’s March, which means there’s still snow on the grass, but only in patches now, like someone forgot to finish erasing winter. The sun is bright but not warm, and the air smells like soggy mittens and dirt coming back to life. There are crocuses pushing up where the old maple cracked its roots through the sidewalk — tiny purple fists, punching winter in the nose.

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Miss Beadle says children should use their indoor voices even when they're outside, but I think she's forgotten what spring feels like. Today I had *high spirits like kites flying,* and there's no hush in that! Just wind and laughter and Grace with her braids flying sideways and Lil' Henry yelling, "Look! I made it loop! *I made it loop!*"

We learned a poem last week by a man named Walt. He said a child went forth every day and everything they saw became a part of them. I asked Miss Beadle if that meant I'd become the terrestrial globe in the corner by the window, then twirled around, but she told me to sit down, with a frown. She likes heads down and mouths shut.

But I think Mr. Walt was right. Because today I became the patch of grass that thawed just enough for my knees to sink in, and the wind that tugged at my kite like it knew secrets, and Grace's shout when hers caught on the bare branches and danced there, stuck but still flying.

I'll be someone else tomorrow. Maybe the crocus that refuses to wait. Maybe the mud puddle under the swings. Maybe a girl who remembers what Aunt Dora says when things feel heavy: "Spring always wins out, even if it takes a little while to warm up."

Maybe that's what I'll become too. Not the highest kite, or the prettiest flower, or even the one who can stay up longest. I'll be the one that keeps trying to rise. Over and over.

Hold on, the wind is calling my name. '*Mabel',* it says. *'Mabel? Where are yoooo?'*

[Shhh, I'm trying to hide from the wind!]

Sometimes, just before dinner, I look at Grace and think she's already halfway to being a grown-up — the kind that remembers rules before joy. But not today. Today she let her braid come undone and yelled louder than anyone when her kite hit the tree. And Lil' Henry fell in the mud, laughed like a loon, and asked if we could do this tomorrow. I hope we do. I hope we all remember how to keep our kites flying, even when they tangle.

Especially then.

# Garden of Eden

Megan pointed out the hill with a nod of her chin. “If you follow the creek past the old fence and that stand of sumac, there’s a cabin back in there somewhere. My granddad used to take me. No one's lived there since before I was your age.”

“I like sitting here,” Evan said. “It’s quiet in the shade.”

“It’s a nice day,” she urged him, hanging clothes on the clothesline. “Go see for yourself while I finish the laundry. Just be back before it’s dry — I’ll want your help folding.”

Evan found the place at the farthest bend of the creek, past the fence half-swallowed by vines, and down the dirt track no one drove down anymore. The cabin wasn’t much—a one-room square of stacked logs with a rust-bit roof and windows milky with mildew.

The door hung padlocked, the kind of detail you only half-notice, like someone meant to come back, but forgot the way. Beside it, the ancient apple tree stood — trunk twisted like a coiled rope, roots gripping the earth as if holding on for dear life. Red fruit swayed high above, dozens of them catching the late sun.

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The apples were tantalizing. Hornets buzzed lazy in the afternoon, drunk on the sugar from the fallen ones. Evan jumped once. Then again, fingers grazing only air. Nothing. He stood there a long time, chest rising and falling, listening to the tree crickets sing.

Evan didn't know who planted the tree. But he felt, in his bones, that it had been someone like him — or someone who loved someone like him. Maybe a boy, barefoot, years ago, who had dug into the stubborn ground with his grandfather, who leaned on the spade and showed how to set the seedling and brace it with wire and poles. He tried to visualize them, in their old denims and flannels, pouring water on the mound.

He wandered around the back of the cabin. From there, the fields stretched out in soft rolls, broken only by clumps of thistle and goldenrod. In the next field over, a girl — maybe his age — drove a Deere tractor slowly back and forth, pulling a hayfork behind. The hay lay in rolls behind her path. When time came, they would shock it up to dry.

Once, she looked over and saw him. He raised a hand. She didn't wave — just turned again at the row's end and followed the furrowed line, steady and unworried.

Evan stood a while longer, watching her shrink in the distance, then turned and walked back to the cabin. He rattled the door. Still locked. He pressed his face against the glass but saw only shadow.

He bent and picked up five cobble stones from around the roots. Turned them in his palm. Then stacked them by the door — not much, just a quiet promise. To remember. To return. To care for the tree.

Then he looked up one more time at the apples, his eyes wide and wondering, and whispered aloud, "What if they left before they ever tasted them?"

The wind stirred. The crickets hummed. He had to get back. The clothes would be dry. Evan walked slowly away, scuffing his heels on the grassed-over path, trailing his hands through the tall golden grass stems. The crickets whispered behind him in the cinnamon afternoon sun, *'They all lived here — once upon a time.'*

At the bend in the road, he turned and looked back. Imaging the boy from long ago, who left the cabin behind for some dreamed-up future — and never came back.

# Apple Head Doll

Piper hadn't wanted to come at all. There was a new Marvel movie playing at the mall, and DeShawn was supposed to meet her and Lexi there, then go 'vibing' afterwards.  But when her mom got the call that the estate lawyer needed someone to start clearing out the house by Sunday AM for the property 'showing', the conversation was over.

She didn't say it aloud, but part of her had kinda wanted to see the old place again — not the house, exactly, but the way the porch felt in fall light, or how it always smelled faintly like her grandmother's old soap and soil and cloves. Still, she wasn't expecting anything more than dust and cobwebs, stuffing boxes and hoping to get home in time to party.

The light through the lace curtain moved like water on the wall, filtered by years of washings and winters, softened by time. The room smelled faintly of lavender, cedar, and something older—buttons, or wax, or the silence that settles in an old house.

Piper sat with the sewing box open across her knees. She had found it while unpacking the last of the things from the attic, tucked beneath a crocheted spread inside the old

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treadle cabinet. She knew it at once—her grandmother's kit, the worn velvet pincushion still holding its silver needles in pink flannel. But she hadn't remembered the doll.

It was small, hand-stitched, the body crocheted in pink and cream, soft with wear. Its head was a dried apple, darkened and creased into a permanent expression of mischief and kindness. One button eye had come loose, hanging by a thread, and the faintest scent of cinnamon still clung to the cotton collar.

Piper held the doll in both hands, thinking, *'I used to play with you!'*

She could remember—with it under the kitchen table while her grandmother sat at the sewing machine, the rhythmic whir of the treadle pedal like a lullaby for the house. She had named the doll "Pippen"—that name seemed to really matter now.

Clara looked around the parlor, wainscoted and papered in faded roses, wondering how her grandmother had felt when tin-lizzies first rattled down the macadam-and-gravel. When the new world needed things—speed, energy, noise. When girls had to trade quiet chores for clerical work, or work in the factories when their boys went off to war.

Had her grandmother longed, even then, to hold onto what was soft and slow? To pour care into a doll no one would call useful?

Piper pressed the doll to her chest. It was ridiculous. Sentimental. Outdated. She should be boxing things up, and getting home, not holding an old doll with one eye.

*What if you loved yourself as much as you loved them?*

The thought came like a whisper, like a thread pulled loose from the past. She closed her eyes, and in the hush, she could hear her grandmother's voice humming a hymn. She could see the old garden outside the window, all hollyhocks and pole beans. She could feel that old kind of love—the kind that takes its time, that kneads bread by hand and stitches joy into the hem of a pillowcase.

Piper stayed a while, shadows climbing the curtains, the apple doll resting in her lap.

And when they had it all boxed up, for a moment, she felt her old self again.

# El Estanque al Anochecer (The Pond at Dusk)

The water in the stone basin was a mirror of the dying light, the apple tree's twisted branches doubled in its depths. Don Pedro traced the pond's edge with his eyes, though his hands stayed buried in the pockets of his sun-bleached work shirt. The tiles—smoothed by his father's hands, and his grandfather's before that—glistened faintly with evening damp.

His nephew, Rafael, stood just behind him, his Cordoban suit too fine for the dust. "They'll pay twice what the land is worth," Rafael said. "Enough for an apartment in Montoro with a balcony. No more hauling water when the well goes dry in August."

Don Pedro said nothing. A ripple broke the pond's surface—the old turtle, its shell the color of a weathered *duro*, sliding off its sunning branch into the water. It moved without urgency, as though the pond were not a place but a kind of time.

He had named the turtle Maya, for the wife that he had lost in the plague years.

"It's just an old *finca*," Rafael insisted. "This will all be *chiringuitos* and parking lots!"

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Don Pedro watched the turtle vanish into the reeds. "Your grandfather built this pond," he spoke solemnly to Rafael. "Carried these stones from the ruins of San Isidro after the maquis burned it. Said they'd outlast him." He tossed a crust of bread into the water; the rippling sky shattered, then stilled. "He was right."

Rafael shifted, his patent leather shoes alien on dry earth. "You can't eat nostalgia, *tío*."

The turtle surfaced near the far bank, its ancient eyes fixed on them—not judging, merely acknowledging, as it might have acknowledged the Moorish kings who once drank from this land's springs. In Andalusia, they said turtles carried the weight of forgotten things on their backs.

"Think on it," Rafael said, turning toward the gate.

Don Pedro said nothing. The turtle sank again, leaving no ripple. He stooped beside the pond and fished out a pale cobble that had come loose from the spring inflow. He turned it in his hand, thumb tracing the chipped corners of the long-lost parish church.

"They'll plant asphalt over the wellhead," he shrugged. "You'll be able to stand right here and forget there was ever a spring." He paused. "That's what the money's for. To forget."

Don Pedro placed the stone back in its crevice. The turtle had vanished again, but he didn't need to see it. He knew where it was.

"You know," he said, twisting slightly toward Rafael, without looking up, "your father tried to sell this place. Said the same things—*plata y pensamiento torcido*."

Rafael's mouth twitched at the words: *'silver and twisted thinking'*. He turned to go.

Don Pedro called after him—not loudly, but with enough weight to carry, "Rafa."

The young man looked back.

"If you do sell it," Don Pedro said, "don't tell me the price of my loss."

Then he turned back again to the old pond, and to Maya.

# They Sit in the Place of Return

The wind carried stories. It always had. Across the rocks, through the canyons, into the creases of old hands and the folds of worn blankets. Tonight, the wind was gentle. Tonight, it listened.

It had not always been so kind. They remembered wind that shrieked through the arroyos, carrying red dust and broken seed pods, scattering cornhusks across the hard-packed yard. But they also remembered wind that brought the scent of roasting piñon and cedar smoke, that carried songs from sheep camps across mesas, and laughter from dances that lasted long into starlight.

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He sat with his boots planted like the roots of the Four Sacred Mountains. She beside him, wrapped in a shawl the color of storm clouds at dusk. They did not speak much anymore, but that was not silence. That was *knowing*.

Seasons had turned many times since they'd raised sheep along the sandstone rim. His hands had once been nimble with fence wire and horse tack. Hers had known the exact warmth of baking stone and the soft resistance of kneaded dough. She had woven from memory—designs passed down like prayers, each color a chapter, each row a journey. Now the loom sat quiet, its woolen strands slack in the back room. The sheep sold. The children, grown, long gone.

Early stars emerged in the fading sky, slow as breath. She traced the belt of the hunter, and he nodded—yes, the boys had followed that one. East, then north. One had sent a photograph in spring—standing before machines and glass towers. The other sent a cassette tape once, years ago, with the laughter of his own children in the background.

"They sleep far from here," he said.

"They wake under the same sky," she answered.

There was no bitterness between them over this. Only the shape of longing that is not quite sorrow. They had raised their sons strong enough to leave—and that, too, was a blessing. The People had always walked. Migration was memory.

She reached over and placed her hand over his, the way the land presses into the sky.

"They will return," she said. "Even if not with footsteps."

He looked at the stars again. At the hush in the sage hills. At the space that lies between all things, palpable as the path underfoot.

In the center of the sacred directions.

In the place of return.

"They already have," he said.

# The Star of Aberystwyth

Old Idris knew the rhythms of ship and sea, and when his son's ship was due to return. It was his boy's first voyage. Idris lit the peat stove. The wind had risen before dawn; the tide soon in full flood.  He pulled on his heavy coat, stitched from sailcloth and sheep's wool, and leaned into his cane. The hound, Bran, was already pacing at the door. Again, today, they would go to watch, and wait, for the *Star of Aberystwyth's* return.

Her captain, a Portuguese master with eyes like basalt, would not risk harboring in the darkness, and chose to wait for fair winds and tides. He stood offshore before first light, all hands ready to unfurl sails and make for the narrow headlands entrance.

Evan had grown up in Idris' poor stone cottage, with its weeping roof and stubborn soil. He chose the sea to chase a chance his father swore comes with salt air and hard work.

The Foundering -

We had her under reefed sail as the storm increased, and we fair flew towards the narrow break in the headlands. I stood on the quarterdeck waiting for orders. The

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helmsman fought the wheel as the wind swung and we drifted towards a jagged lee shore. We'd started fair for the entrance, but the tide had not yet turned.

The bosun's mate face paled when our ship shuddered, and the shorn tiller rope spun the wheel out of the helmsman's grasp.  The rudder had hit a hidden rock. She bucked beneath us like a broken thing, swinging hard abeam of the waves, and broaching.

The sails cracked from tension. Men stood by the anchor windlass and scrambled up the rigging. As I looked up, there, on the cliffs, I saw him watching. A lone sentinel. My da'. Then our ship suddenly grounded, heeled over hard, and I was thrown into the sea.

As spindrift surge pushed me toward the waiting rocks, I saw my father raise his cane, cursing the heavens, shrieking at the storm that drowns me now, and though I am lost, I raised my hand to meet his, whether it could save either from this fate.

That gesture was the last thing I remembered.

The Fall -

The sky was pale milk when I woke, sand caked in my beard. I coughed seawater and the pain in my ribs told me I was still alive. A warm muzzle—familiar, frantic. Bran! Ears back, paws scrabbling on shale, nose down to my cheek, then away, then back. Waiting, eager, tail wagging, whining for me to come see.

I followed. Every part of me hurt, but my legs still worked. It was not to the cottage, not to the warmth of my old home, but to the foot of the headland cliff that Bran lead me.

There, on shelfs of broken stone and battered driftwood, lay my father's body, shattered.

He'd slipped in his rage, and fallen. His arm lay stretched out still, as a final curse. The cane lay broken under him.  His eyes closed, face oddly calm.  I sat beside him, my hand against his that once held mine, to guide my black knife across the cold peat beds.

*'The sea will make a man of you!'* Idris had clapped my back at our parting.

And so, perhaps, it has.

# Blue Umbrella

They had eaten breakfast early, though none of them had much appetite. Her father buttered toast no one touched, and her mother reheated coffee three times. The dog Finn circled under the table, unsettled, as if he knew this was no ordinary morning. Outside, the sky hung low and pearly, full of withheld autumn weather.

The station wagon was already packed—two suitcases, a lumpy duffel, a satchel and her favorite books she'd wanted to bring. A paper bag of snacks, and a best wishes letter from her grandmother in South Windsor. Eliza had taken a last look at her room—at the bookshelf over her old study desk, the lamp with the hummingbird pull chain, the notch in the baseboard where she'd once hidden a folded paper ring a boy gave her.

Better to leave it all undisturbed. Let the silence close around it like sleep.

The station wagon thundered to life. Her father turned on the radio, then turned it off. Her mother fussed with the scarf at Eliza's throat, then stopped, hand lingering there. "Where's my umbrella?" Eliza scanned the back. Her favorite blue plaid umbrella.

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The rain smelled of pine needles and mushrooms as Eliza stood at the edge of the paved lane, her dog, Finn, pressing a damp muzzle into her palm. Her mother had bought the umbrella at a market—"It matches your plaid skirt!"—not knowing blue would become the color of her daughter's rebellion.

Last semester, Eliza'd seen a girl on campus twirling an umbrella, laughing as rain slid off the fabric like shattered glass. For weeks after, Eliza dreamed of that girl's careless stride, the way professors' voices dimmed when she walked into lectures late. She'd tried it herself—ditching chapel, smoking behind the boathouse, kissing a senior whose chin smelled of Eros Eau. But still no one whispered about her. Nobody paid any attention to Eliza when she walked up. They'd all scurry away.

So Eliza told her parents she wanted to go to private boarding school instead. She applied in March, then worked the summer at their local library. Her old Catholic school registrar sent a form to fill out, stating why she was leaving

Now she was here at Middleton Academy, and it was Fall. A bridge to independence gained, above a yawning chasm of loneliness. She only had to cross. Eliza looked back.

The blue plaid umbrella bloomed above her like tomorrow's bright sky.

"Now", her father waved with a gentle smile. "You'll call if—"

"Yes." Her mouth was dry as a cotton boll, her mind unable to grasp this moment.

Finn whined. She crouched to bury her face in his fur, inhaling the scent of home—

"Be a good boy!" Finn's tail wagged furiously.

The umbrella's handle tugged at her hand in a puff of autumn breeze. Eliza made herself turn away. Not away from the unpopular girl she'd longed to leave behind, so much, but toward the one she hoped to become: a scholarship student with bright eyes and a career written in constellations. A cloistered life of doors and windows and bridged passages.

"Bye!" she finally waved. Her father called Finn back, then they stood quietly, watching.

Eliza's heart beat faster as the closing boarding school door clicked shut behind her.

# Still Warm

Millie Carmine had always baked when she was nervous. And even now, in ’47, with Joe home safe from the Navy and the union strong, her hands found flour like memory. She had two pies cooling on the sill—plum, with sugar crusts—and her little Tommy and his friend Ezra were on the stoop below, whispering like conspirators.

“They’re still warm,” Ezra whispered, mouth just about watering. Their pup, Patch, wagged his whole back end and gave an encouraging yelp.

Inside, Perry Como played softly as Millie wiped her hands and peeked through the curtain. She saw them there—Tommy’s fingers twitching with indecision, Ezra’s wide-eyed joy barely contained.

She didn’t say a word. Instead, she thought about the war ration books, the empty sugar jars, the long silence when Joe was gone. She thought about the neighbors who never got their boys back. And she thought, maybe the best thing we can do with peace is to let joy live without permission.

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Ezra was the first to reach out—hovering, not yet daring to touch. Then Tommy looked up and saw his mother watching. Ezra gasped. “We’re caught!”

The boys sat down cross-legged on the stoop, their knees scabbed, their hair slicked back with hopeful effort. Ezra’s socks didn’t match, and Tommy’s shirt had lost a button. Neither of them cared. Summer was a kind of uniform.

From across the street, old Mr. DiPaolo sat on a folding chair behind a paper, eyes never quite leaving the boys. He had a striped umbrella rigged up with twine and a pitcher of lemon water sweating on a TV tray. He’d fought in the last war, and now he dozed through this peace like he’d earned it.

Patch the dog barked once and then again, louder, tail wagging like he knew a secret. A breeze lifted the curtain. Inside, Millie leaned over the sink and flicked on the tap. Her hands still bore flour in the creases. She thought of her mother, who used to scold her for wasting butter, and of the strange canned rations they’d once called meat. She thought of how long it had taken Joe to come back through the train gate, the way Tommy had stared at his uniform, then clung to him like he could vanish.

“*Dad!*”

She let the cold water run a moment longer than needed. Then footsteps came down the hall—Joe’s boots, loosened from habit, each step softer than the ones he’d carried back from Okinawa. Joe, who still sometimes woke at 4 a.m. sharp, unsure where he was. He paused behind Millie at the sink, rested his palm on her back.

“Feeling better, honey?” she smiled, leaning her head back to rest on his shoulder.

Outside, on the stoop, Tommy gave Ezra a shove. “Go on then.”

“You go! You’re her kid.”

Laughter bubbled between them, rising like bread in the heat.

Tommy finally reached the pie. He broke the crust just a little. The scent of spiced plum rolled out like a country song. “Still warm,” he whispered to Ezra.

# Last Sheaf (A Valley Reverie)

The morning mist clung to the stubbled fields like the ghost of harvests past, and Elias Hargrave—though his knees groaned their protest—would not let the season pass without this final vigil. Beside him, Martha crouched in her faded shawl, her fingers tracing the earth as if reading its memories. Their old Bernese, Druid, sat nearby, his muzzle gone white as the frost yet to come.

The valley stretched before them, its folds lost in the pearled haze, the far woods bleeding gold into the sky. It was the kind of morning that made a man feel both king and relic, standing at the edge of all that he'd tended and cared for and harvested, yet knowing the earth would outlast him still.

Strange, Elias mused, how a life could be measured in sheaves. Fifty autumns he'd walked these rows, watching the sun gild the cornstalks, feeling the ache of labor settle into his bones like a second skeleton. Now the fields lay bare, the last shocks bundled and hauled away, the drying shed's slats bulging with plenty. But the quiet after harvest was its own kind of labor—a reckoning.

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The Hargraves had never been ones for town gossip or church socials; their communion was with the land itself. Martha still set out crumbs for the crows come winter, whispering that the birds carried messages between worlds. Elias scoffed, but he'd seen her leave a twist of barley at the wood's edge for the other folk—those airy spirits Dutchmen swore still lingered in the hollows.

A gust rattled the oaks at the field's end, and Finn pricked his ears. Martha's breath hitched. "D'you hear it?" she murmured. Not the wind, nor the distant cry of a hawk—but something thinner, older. A fiddle's ghost, perhaps, or the echo of a harvest song sung when the valley was young.

The old Dutch tales called them the Donderkopf—the thunder-heads—said they led men astray for spite or sport, especially come harvest's end, when the veil was thin and the fields went quiet. Lantern-lighters, song-thieves, wind-dancers. Elias reckoned they were just the land's way of reminding a man he didn't own it, not truly. Still, when the fog pooled just so, he sometimes fancied he saw shapes in it: tall figures with antlered brows, or the flicker of a flame where no hand held it.

Martha stood, brushing dirt from her skirts. "Rain's coming," she said, but her eyes were on the trees by the field, where the mist was rising in coils, watching.

Elias knew she meant more than the weather. Time was the final harvest, and its scythe cut clean. He pulled up the dried husk of a corncob still wedged in the clay—next year's seed, if they lived to plant it. Martha looped her arm through Elias's, and they turned toward the farmhouse, its chimney smoke slowly curling.

But behind them, in the swallowed field, the mist did not rest. It whirled. It spun. First came the fiddles—high, sweet, slightly off-key. Then the tapping of little hooves on stone. A lantern bobbed between the shocks of corn. And a figure, antler-crowned and smiling, tipped its hat to the assembled elven folk.

The Donderkopf were out early this year. Winter would be long. Some might not survive until Spring. But tonight, at least, there would be dancing!

# Armor of Light

The war had moved through them like a prairie fire—scorching the surface but leaving the deep roots untouched. Now, in the stillness that follows all great storms, they returned to each other in the old house, its bones heavier than memory, its walls steeped in the quiet of generations.

Her grandparents had built it when the land was still new, and you could see their hands in every joint of oak, every door that stuck in its frame like a stubborn thought. There was a mercy in such things—in the way they persisted without announcement.

The boys had their chins propped on fists, leaning in. The book in their father's hands might have been Scripture, but it was the rhythm of their parents' voices that held them—his voice steady as a plow cutting sod, hers soft but unyielding, like creek water wearing stone. They might have been reading the same lines for a hundred Novembers.

Light pooled under the Tiffany lamp, butter-yellow and thick, its stained-glass shade casting petals of color over the rug. Outside, the wind shouldered against the house with the same restless patience it had used on the tallgrass before the plows came.

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“The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber,” he read, then paused and tapped the margin with his thumb. “That’s Romans, chapter thirteen.”

The older boy, Joseph, asked, “Is that the part where it gets all swords and stuff?”

Their mother Rose smiled faintly, keeping her finger on the line. “No, honey.”

Their father Richard leaned back, but didn’t close the book. “It’s Paul, writing to the Romans. He’s reminding us that even when the world’s dark, you don’t have to be.”

Joseph made a face. “So we’re supposed to wear light like a jacket?”

“Like armor,” the little Johnny whispered. “That’s what it says.”

Their father nodded. “Armor of light. Not swords or shields. Not even words, sometimes. Just the way you live. The choices you make.”

“Like when Grandma saved sugar rations to make cookies for the neighbor boys,” their mother said. “That’s how you make peace. Not by talking about it. By *being* it.”

The boys were quiet. The wind leaned against the house again. The chain of the lamp clicked once more, and they sat in a warm hush, armored in light.

Not a commandment now, but a confirmation. *We are here. We endured.* The boys didn’t speak, but the younger one mouthed the phrase *armor of light* silently. It sounded like something you’d wear under your shirt, next to your skin.

The house smelled of lye soap and the faint, woolen scent of mended coats. Rationing had ended, but they ate spare meals still from the old Victory garden—not from lack, but from a kind of covenant. Waste was a sin against the unspoken pact they’d made with this house, with the glass jars saved, the stories folded into drawers like pressed flowers.

When the book closed, it was without ceremony. The lamp’s chain clicked, and the dark seeped in from the corners.. No one stirred. Across the table, her hand settled beside his. They did not grasp, only let their knuckles brush—proof of presence, like two trees grown close enough to touch at the roots.

Still whole. Still home. A family.

# The Wind’s Bargain

The wind here had a voice—not the hollow moan of lowland gusts, but a snarling thing that spoke in the old tongue, hissing through the bent pines like a bard reciting curses. Malcolm MacAllister leaned into its push, his cane biting the peat as if to root him against the sky’s tantrum. Ishbel, two steps behind, clutched her shawl with one hand and the rope lead of their sway-backed ewe with the other.

The beast bleated once, a sound swallowed by the gale. They’d brought her from the croft with tight mouths and heavier thoughts. Not for food, not for wool, but for silver—enough, perhaps, to draw the doctor from Lerwick.

The boy’s name was Callum. Son of Isla, whose husband was lost to the rigs the year before. Now the lad lay sweat-drenched and shivering in a fisherman's cottage with walls thin as birch bark and a chimney that rattled like a dying breath. His fever had held for three days. The minister had sent word to the parish: prepare your prayers.

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But Ishbel packed her carpet bag. “I’ve mid-wived the women and the sheep both.”

At Dunrossness, old Murchison eyed the ewe without expression. "Past her keepin’," he muttered. “A kind trade.” Still, he gave the coin. Ishbel gave no thanks. She was already unwrapping muslin sachets from her satchel, herbs that smelled of dry moss and bitter hope. Malcolm bought tea with what remained and waited by the kirk stove.

When the doctor arrived, he admonished Ishbel, “You’ve no license for this!” But she pushed him aside, crushing dried bog myrtle with a pestle carved from whale bone. She anointed the boy’s forehead with balm until the scent filled the small room like a green cathedral. She didn’t pause for the wind, or the prayers, or Isla’s grief pounding the walls in waves. Only when Callum’s breath slowed—deep and sleep-like, the fever leaking from him like cool mist—did she press her palm to his chest, then nod once.

The doctor allowed as to the boy’s soon recovery, donned his kit, and waved off his fee. “*Mae'r glyn yn cofio ei curoddwyr* (The glen remembers its healers)”, he nodded.

They walked home in the teeth of the storm, exhausted but unburdened. The rain came sideways, needling their cheeks. Ishbel’s shawl whipped loose from her shoulders and flew away above the heather. She didn’t turn. “Leave it,” she called, her voice frayed.

Malcolm knew it had been her mother’s—spun so fine it could pass through a wedding ring. But the wind took what it pleased: wool, tears, warmth. It had taken their child once, in the hush between Christmas and Hogmanay, before their world began again.

So yet the glen endured. The stubborn grass would rise come spring. The peat would burn slow in the hearth. The lichen would silver the stones again, just as the bones of the dead silvered in their cairns.

Let Murchison have his fire and whisky. Let the doctor shake his head. Callum lives!

That was the wind’s bargain.

# Die Zwischenzeit

It was the hour the Germans call *die Zwischenzeit*—the between-time—when the light is neither day nor night but something older, something that remembers when the world was soft and unformed. Tonight it was the ghostly realm of Professor Avrenim Bell.

Avrenim taught “Theory of Mostly Arcane Systems” at the Inverness Academy for the Exceptionally Curious—an International Baccalaureate magnet school housed in what had once been a wool mill. The quirky kids there were quick, strange, compassionate. They collectively cared for a horde of Shaw’s gerbils, named after famous scientists.

Even at the Academy, Avrenim’s syllabus confused people. Her lectures began with climate models, but then devolved into mushroom spores and wound on through logic paradoxes and grief rituals. “All systems,” she said, tapping the board with a stick of red chalk, “are made of arcane stories. Even this one.” And she circled the word *real life*.

Every Thursday, she left campus with a basket and did not return until Monday. “Solo fieldwork,” she told the school headmaster. “Extremely intersectionally obtuse.”

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In truth, the mushrooms *were* her work. And tonight, under a sky bruised by sunset, the Milky Way already bright in the zenith, she stepped carefully into their faery ring. She knelt beside a flush of chanterelles, soft as yolk. Around her, the air thickened—fern, loam, the tin-penny tang of coming rain. A giggle flickered from the underbrush.

A blur zipped past her cheek, tugging loose a silver thread from her sleeve. “Borrowing,” it chirped, invisible, vanishing.

“Oh, you’re late,” she laughed, paying them small attention.

The *fae* folk were fond of trade. They loved thimbles, bottle caps, loose buttons. They returned them tangled with oak leaves, copper wire, and, once, a fossil animal tooth embedded in amber. Mostly they cultivated mushroom rings for Avrenim as trade.

She added a puffball to her basket. It sighed under her hand. Overhead, the stars had begun to stitch themselves across the sky. Not *like* a necklace—more like a net flung wide. Behind her, the stream caught the starlight and threw it back in ripples. She didn’t need to turn. The forest always did that to her when the threshold grew near.

Another giggle. Then a pinecone bounced off her boot, gently.

“Yes, I’ll leave something.” She smiled, pulling her shawl tight. She would always leave something warm to eat for them, in trade for the mushroom rings they laid out.

In the Academy garden, the gerbils were tucking into their seed trays. Avrenim pictured them, spinning in their wheels like they knew something urgent about the future. Maybe they did? Maybe the arcane systems of the world were faded, thin and twitching now. Only the ancient ones—mushrooms, myths and crones—remembered how to listen.

A tiny childlike voice piped from the edge of the faery ring. “What’s for supper, missus?”

“Soup,” Avrenim said, standing with a sigh. “With garlic and barley and wild things.”

“You always say soup.”

“Because it’s always true!”

# Luthier’s Gospel

In a modest stone house set back from the winding lanes of Bath, not far from where water once claimed healing virtue, Master Alaric tended to his work in silence.

He had once spoken with princes — not for himself, but for his wife, Isolde, whose hands could summon tears from even the most lacquered of courtiers.

Her music had filled the halls of Windsor and Westminster both, and even old King Henry himself had praised her fingers as "graced by the seraphim."

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But time, that cruel chorus-master, changed its tune. The viol and lute gave way to pompous fanfares and the brassy laughter of foreign strings. Isolde's playing was called "delicate," then "quaint," and then not called for at all.

She took her fall with outward grace, as all would-be-noblewomen must, but it soured her marrow. The fever came the following spring, as if summoned by her grief. She died without complaint, her fingers curling like fern fronds on the sheets, too weak to lift her psaltery even once more.

Since then, Alaric had taken no commissions. He carved only one instrument now — a seven-stringed lute in dark yew, burnished with beeswax and old prayers. Each curve of the body followed the memory of her spine; each fret he laid in remembrance of a phrase she once played on a winter morning when frost haloed the casements.

The cat came soon after. Thin, pale, with eyes too large for its face, it appeared one Advent dusk and refused to leave. It lay curled upon the wood shavings by Alaric's bench, blinking as if privy to secrets too gentle for men. He named it Theophilus, which meant *loved of God*, though he never said the name aloud.

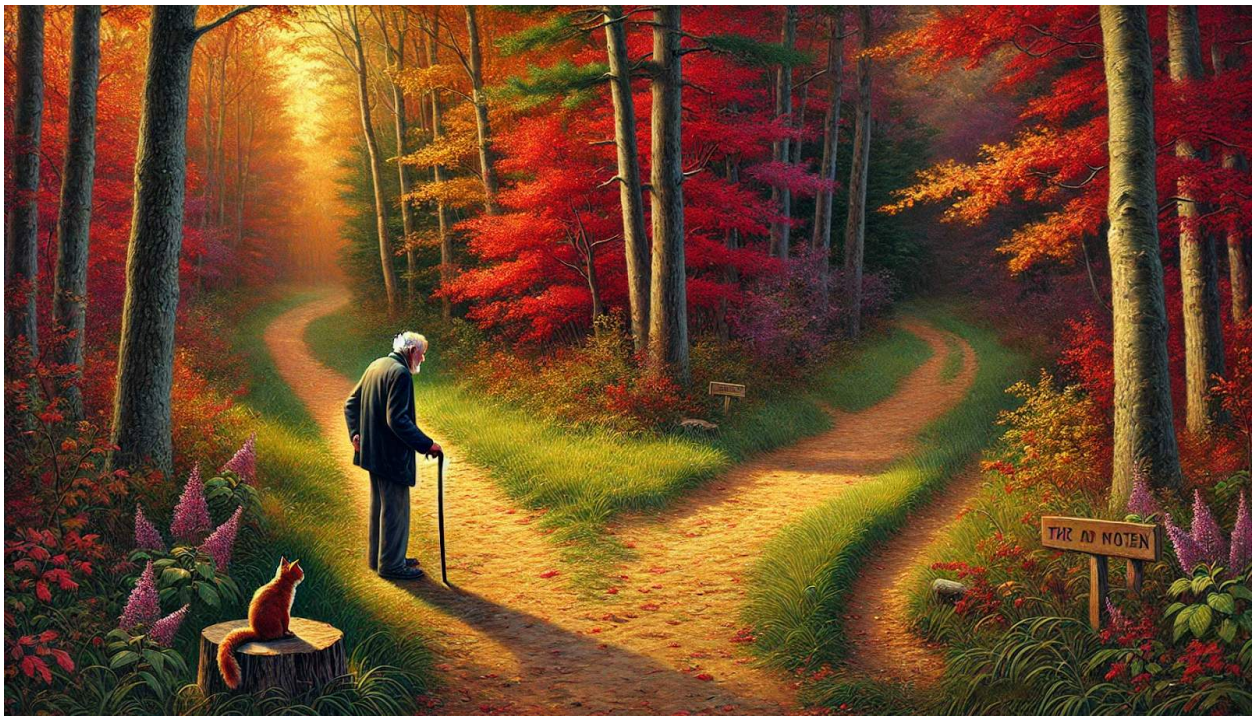
Neighbors brought food, sometimes firewood or beeswax. The vicar left a note suggesting return to fellowship. Alaric read it, wept over it, and burned it. His prayers were carved now, not spoken.

One evening, as snow hemmed the windowpanes and the last coat of oil dried on the lute's neck, Alaric set the instrument upright and lit a single candle. Theophilus leapt onto the bench, tail wrapped neatly around his paws. The candle's light flickered upon the polished wood, which glowed as if remembering in song.

Alaric, though long untrained, reached trembling fingers to the strings. The first note was imperfect, the second less so, and by the fifth he wept.

"She is reaching for you," said a voice — or was it thought? Or wind? He could not say. Outside, snow fell upon the lane like a benediction. The lute sang, its simple tune softly in his hands, and Theophilus, unmoving, gazed not at the instrument but at the empty chair beside the hearth, where Isolde once sat and now was remembered.

# Weight of the Buckeye



Samuel stood where the path forked, unable to decide or to remember where they led.

In his coat pocket, the buckeye pressed against his palm, round and warm like a promise. The woods around him whispered in a thousand tongues—birch leaves brushing, pine needles crackling, the hush-hush-hush of little movements.

On a recently cut stump nearby, the cat curled its tail like a question mark. It blinked slowly—tail twitching once, twice—then looked down the left-hand path where the sun still pooled gold among the autumn leaves.

The left path wound downhill into the light, the air warm, the sand wet with moss and memory. The right path, choked in shadow, climbed into fir-dark stones. That was the one his son had taken, when they walked together years past. Samuel shifted his cane. His knees were no good. Still, he had walked here, to the old forest preserve, out of some instinct. It had been years. The doctor had told him to stay home. He had come anyway.

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The cat trotted toward the brighter path, then stopped. Looked back. Samuel stood. The buckeye in his pocket pulsed, somehow. Not with heat, exactly—but with memory. That long-ago summer: Charlie running ahead, boots kicking up pine needles. “Here, Dad!” he’d shouted, waving a little seed like treasure. “It’s a buckeye! You keep it, okay?”

Now when he stepped forward toward the right path, the memory, something shifted. The woods didn’t move—but the light did. Tilted. Slid. Time bunched up like fabric.

A clearing opened around him like a held breath. The cat was gone. Or behind him. Or inside him. Across the glade stood a boy, taller than memory but shining just the same. His face held no anger, no grief. Only waiting. Samuel blinked. His breath caught.

“Charlie?”

The boy smiled. “You took our old way, Dad.”

Samuel reached for the buckeye he had always carried since, but his pocket was empty. The boy held it in his palm. Offered it back.

“You dropped this,” he sparkled like the light that played behind him. Through him.

Samuel laughed, hoarse and shaking. “Always the same trick.”

“I learned from the best,” said the boy.

The cat returned—except it wasn’t a cat anymore. Not quite. Its shape flickered like flame, like a girl with too many eyes, like a wind wearing fur. It circled them once. Purring loudly. Content with the sound of their happy voices.

Samuel turned back toward the fork—back there, but where? The clearing held him.

There was the sunset now, fading golds and reds in the clouds above. The hush of woods had softened into his breath. The glade felt full. Not crowded, just…witnessed.

He looked at his son. “Do I keep going, then?”

Charlie’s gaze was kind. “You already are.”

# Salir Avante, Chica Joven

“Mama,” Luz said, pressing her thumb to her phone screen, “Jocy said the girls at school called her uniform a ‘taco costume.’ She laughed when I punched Isabella’s shoulder. Now her Instagram’s a memorial. Flooded with hearts. Why?”

Rosa didn’t answer at first. She was kneeling in the red dirt beside the trail, braiding *ocotillo* thorns into a crooked cross for Easter. Her hands moved without thinking, but her eyes were sharp, tracking the sky. A shrike wheeled overhead.

“The desert doesn’t suffer soft things,” Rosa said finally. The trail paused atop the mesa, where the world fell away into sky and stone. Mateo stood a distance off, scanning the valley with his hat in hand. The dogs, Chuy and Pilar, sniffed the edge, tails high.

Luz’s phone buzzed—a Snapchat from Isabella. Blurred hallway. Spilled books. A smudge of a face mid-cry, then laughing emoji. “I hate them,” she muttered. “They edited Jocy’s TikTok. The Selena one. Made it look like she was singing while she—” Her voice broke. “They put clown emojis on it. Like it’s a joke.”

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Mateo flicked the phone screen gently with a calloused finger. “Once we feared the rattlesnake and the scorpion. Now the poison lives in these glass *tabletas*.” He looked out at the horizon, “You carry death in your pocket, *mija*.”

Rosa stood and held the ocotillo cross at arm’s length. It trembled like a divining rod. She looked at Luz. “You will be stronger than Jocy, and you will survive this.”

Rosa hooked the cross on a juniper branch where it swung, not quite a crucifix, not quite a scarecrow. A gust sent a loose wren feather tumbling, slow and spiraled. The dogs perked up. Something ahead. They barked once, then darted down the path.

Jocy had come over every day that winter, after Pilar’s litter was born. Six blind little beans, yipping in the warmth of the shed. They’d named each one. Luz had wanted to call the runt ‘Diablito,’ but Jocy had insisted on ‘Frijol.’

“She said Frijol was her favorite,” Luz said. “Because he was ugly and brave.”

The sun lit up the trail in amber and gold, softening the edges of the world. Luz turned off her phone. Slipped it into her pocket.

“Jocy wanted to cut her hair,” she said. “All of it. I said I’d go first if she did. I said we’d shave our heads and look like desert witches.” She touched her own braid. “But she didn’t. She said her grandma would cry.”

Mateo reached over and tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. “*Te amamos, mija*,” he whispered. “Even when the world is ugly. Even when dogs bark and no one listens.”

The wind stirred again. The *ocotillo* cross spun slightly on its hook. In its slow turning, Luz saw Jocy twirling in her backyard, one of the puppies in her arms. The smallest one, the one with the spot on its eye. Spinning, laughing. “Frijolito forever!” she’d shouted.

The trail turned, and the desert stretched wide before them. Each cactus stood sentinel, crowned with flowers like flames. Each bird call a note in a language older than grief.

Behind them, the wren feather still turned. Not up, not down. Just spinning. Just staying in the light a little while longer.

# The Kingdom of Little Things

The microscope loomed on the desk like a space turret. A water flea—Daphnia—twitched on the slide. Jamie leaned in. The two girls leaned in with him.

Amanda on his left. Sophia on his right. Their shoulders brushed his. Their breaths smelled like Smarties and herbal tea.

“Well?” Amanda asked. “Still alive?”

Sophia whispered, “If it is, it’s in poetic agony. What’s its name?”

Jamie shrugged. “Keith.”

Amanda nodded. “Tragic soul. Totally Keith.”

Jamie looked again. Keith hovered in his droplet galaxy. Flash of leg. Twitch of light. Just enough motion to count as life.

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He thought of Eric. Not his real brother—his stepbrother for nine months. They used to eat fries and watch Three Kingdoms on weekends, shouting at ancient generals and rewriting Chinese history with bad accents. On Saturdays, they double-dated twins, Janis and Jeri. Eric never got their names right. Jamie never forgot them.

Then Eric left. No note. No scene. Just quiet. Maybe he joined the Air Force?

Jamie squinted. Keith looked like he might implode.

“You’re spacing,” Amanda said.

“Just thinking,” Jamie muttered. “Keith’s going through stuff.”

Sophia adjusted the coarse focus. “Give him some privacy.”

Ms. Kovacs floated by, dropping a scarlet leaf onto Jamie’s notebook.

“Autumn,” she said, “is when biology remembers it’s made of ghosts. Exit slip: One paragraph. Bigger or smaller—how do small things make you feel?”

Amanda muttered, “God, she’s on one of those mama’s little helpers again.”

Sophia whispered, “That’s the assignment and the metaphor.”

Jamie wrote:

> *Keith has one eye and half a heart, but swims like hell in a cage he doesn’t understand. Sometimes I miss people who never fully stayed. He reminds me to keep kicking*.

Jamie looked back one more time. Keith was gone—slid out of view or crushed under the lens. All that remained was a bubble.

Outside, the trees blushed red at the tips. Jamie walked behind the girls, listening to their voices drift, and imagined Eric beside him.

Just long enough to say: You would’ve liked Keith, man. He fought the whole time.

# Lift-Off

Aiden checked the tethers again, even though the old man had already asked twice.

“We’re good,” he said gently, flashing a smile at the white-haired couple in matching windbreakers. The woman clutched a paper bag of trail mix. The man’s hands rested eagerly on the rim of the basket, like a kid about to jump a fence.

Around them, the fairgrounds swelled with color. Canopies flapped. Radios played. A half-dozen balloons floated above the field, slow and rising like lanterns called to prayer.

“First time?” Aiden asked.

The man nodded. “Bucket list. We’re finally checking it off.”

The woman glanced at the sky, uncertain. “Just don’t make us famous, alright? I don’t want to end up on the news with my hair on fire.”

Aiden laughed. “No fireballs today. I promise.”

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He stepped back, gave the go-ahead, and the burners flared to life. Heat thundered into fabric. The envelope bloomed upward—gold and turquoise against a cobalt morning. Then the basket lifted, slow and sure.

The Rio Grande Valley begins with a hush. A thousand feet press gently into the cool valley floor while the sky waits, pale and blue as ancient pottery glaze. Then—breath by breath—fire whispers into fabric, and the balloons rise like blessings made visible.

The balloon rocked gently. Aiden glanced back at the couple—Del and Cal, he remembered now. Married fifty-something years. They had boarded like tourists but now stood like pilgrims, touched quiet by altitude. Aiden gave them space.

He'd flown dozens of times, watched people rise up like this—nervous at first, then hushed, then lit from within. But it never got old. Especially with the older couples. They brought something else with them. History, maybe. A kind of earned wonder.

The wind pulled them westward, over piñon groves and brush-laced arroyos, the Rio Grande winding silver below. From above, the river was a ribbon. The dirt roads were seams in a quilt. The land didn't hide its age—it wore it proudly, like rings in old wood.

Aiden checked their altitude, tapped a valve, and the burner hissed softly again. Around them, other balloons floated at different heights, a loose constellation of color—reds, oranges, sea-glass blue—like a sky full of held breaths.

"You're doing great," he said over his shoulder.

The woman met his eyes. "I didn't think I'd like it."

"And now?"

"I think I might stay."

The man nodded. Then: "I used to think this kind of thing was for other people."

Aiden smiled. "I'm glad you're here."

# Hithener’s Beacon

May’s gilded light spilled over Whitehaven’s shingle beach, where the Atlantic licked the stones like a wolf remembering blood. The lighthouse—Hithener’s charge for thirty years—stood sentinel on the bluff, its beam cutting through salt-haze where Viking longships once anchored.

Alistair Hithener leaned against the manor’s sun-warmed wall, pipe smoke curling into the blossom-thick air. Below, his grandson chased sheep through split-rail paddocks, laughing as the dogwoods shook petals like confetti. Aye, soft times, Alistair mused. His own father had swung a pick in the pits, hands black with coal that fed the Lowthers’ ships. Those hulls now rusted beneath Dublin’s docks.

"Ye ken the Thumb?" he’d ask the bairns, pointing inland where Penrith’s crosses stabbed the sky. Giant’s Grave, the tourists called it, snapping photos. But Alistair knew the truth: those stones marked Norsemen who’d carved this land with axes before the Scots came raiding. His own blood held their echo—a Hithener once took a Richard’s arrow at Brougham and lived to spit the fletching back.

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The lighthouse lamp flared to life with a thunk. Alistair rubbed the old scar on his wrist—a souvenir from the ’75 storm when the beacon spiral iron stairs nearly tore free of its tower. That night, waves had clawed at the cliffs like the draugr of drowned seamen. Now, the sea lay docile, glittering like a leather purse of stolen silver.

His daughter-in-law called from the farmhouse, her voice threading through the air. She’d married in from Penrith, her people tending fields Roman boots once marched. "Come eat!" she shouted, as if the century could be summoned by appetite alone.

Alistair lingered. Out past the bay, a freighter crawled the horizon—no coal in its belly, just containers stamped with brands. The lighthouse beam swept over it, indifferent.

"Granda!" The boy tugged his sleeve, clutching a lilac sprig. "Make the story!"

Alistair took the lilac gently, twirling the stem between his fingers. "Well now," he said, squinting at the sea, "did I ever tell you how the Whitehaven Queen lost her anchor?"

The boy shook his head, solemn as a bishop.

"Aye then. It were in ’29. Not 1929, mind—1829—when steam still spooked horses and navies feared fog more than Frenchmen. A Hithener lad—barely sixteen, same age as my uncle Robbie when he ran off to sail—was stoker on the Queen. Name of Tam. Red hair like foxbrush and lungs like bellows."

The boy giggled. “Tam’s me!”

“Aye, could be.” Alistair leaned closer. “One night, off Rathlin Sound, the sea went queer. Flat as a millpond, not a ripple—but the wind blew backwards, against its own will. Then came a light. Not a star, no. Green. Bright as church glass.”

The boy’s eyes widened. “A sea witch?”

“Worse,” Alistair said. “Tam saw her—a woman of salt and tangleweed! …. The child’s eyes shone. Above them, gulls wheeled like the souls of unquiet miners, and the rotating beacon’s pulse wrote a patina of light on the clouds, again and again:

Be wary! Be wary!

# Miko no Hana Chikai (The Shrine Maiden’s Vow)

Hanako the flower-girl sold her grandfather’s garden flowers in the market in Noritsu. The market had been slow that morning. Hanako’s flowers—cut at dawn, stems wrapped in damp cloth—had wilted under the indifferent gaze of passersby. By noon, only a few remained saleable. It had been a poor morning.

A young boy-monk paused before her stall, his eyes downcast and silent, holding his alms bowl outstretched. She turned her face away and waved her hand, as if to say: *Not today. Not when I have nothing for myself.*

Her grandfather heard all this. His eyes lidded in shame. That afternoon, as Hanako swept up, his voice—dry as old scrolls—stopped her. ”I overheard you and the boy. A closed hand gathers no blessings." he chided her. Then he told her of the Dakini, the sky-dancing wisdom that slips between worlds. "Once," he said, "a woman, like you will become, refused alms to a beggar. That night, a fox came to her door. ‘Follow,’ it said, and led her deep into the woods where the spirit-guide *Amaterasu* herself waited.

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Hanako scoffed as she recalled his story. But at first light the next day, she knotted her special kimono, and set out with a dew-fresh white lily in hand. "Where is this imaginary shrine of yours?" she'd asked her grandfather the night before, as he ended his tale.

He'd smiled. "You will find it on your path."

The bamboo forest swallowed her whole. Shadows pooled like ink between the stones. The air hummed its cool breath, scents of something ancient. Then—there it was! A narrow clearing, stone lanterns, a sacred shrine and twin torii gates to ward off evil.

The altar gleamed in dark wood, carved with symbols that flowed and shifted under her gaze. She knelt transfixed, and then a fox appeared— eyes knowing. A *kitsune!*

Behind the shrine, the air began to shimmer. Then *Amaterasu's* face emerged from the mist, larger than seemed real, and radiant as the sun shone through silk. The goddess's smile was neither kind nor cruel, but measured:

*'What you deny to others,'* the goddess seemed to say, *'you deny to your own soul.'*

Hanako placed the lily on the altar. "I brought nothing worthy," she confessed, bowing her head until her brow touched the wood. The fox kitsune did not move. Its tail flicked once, slow as a falling leaf, watching her.

The kitsune's ears twitched. Then it padded forward, lightly, like a wind across rice paper. Its nose touched her wrist. At that moment, something small and stubborn inside her gave way—like old snow releasing a buried crocus.

She stood at last. Before her, the shimmer of the goddess faded, but the air felt lighter now. She could not say how long she'd been kneeling. The shadows had shifted. The forest no longer loomed—it listened.

On the path home, she gathered wildflowers, every one she saw. At the edge of Noritsu, she found the boy-monk again, bowl outstretched, his eyes uncertain.

Hanako smiled and placed the whole bundle into his bowl.

"Today," she said, "I have everything to give."

# Witness to Avatars

They bloom without asking. The daffodils, I mean.

Same week. Same place. All of them in a vast stretch with  their bright heads like they've just remembered why they were born.

I didn't come back for that. That's not what this is. The ridge still remembers, even if no one else does. I come for the way the light strikes the forest and wakes it, the way the air lifts just right—like it's full of wings.

We were on our way to a wedding, Eleanor and I. Off the county road.  Early summer, warm days and all. We had time before the ceremony, so we hiked up the hill behind the barn. The rain shower had passed and everything was steaming in the sun with color, the daffodils riotous underfoot, and the stream—it actually sang that day.

Then the butterflies came, called up out of the flowers by the sun. A hundred? A thousand? Swallowtails, golden with black brushstrokes, rising like a shaken quilt of light. We stood there with our hands outstretched like children or prophets or fools, and

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the whole sky turned to gold and velvet wings. ‘Ben, look! Look!!” She was transfixed, eyes wide, arms out astonished. Like she’d just been let in on the secret of the universe. We hugged and danced in circles with them, then fell on our backs laughing.

Wow! Only the sound of our breath and pips of joy, as they filled the sky above us.

We walked down to the wedding still laughing. They were friends of friends. We all gathered by the huge barn doors, then went inside. Straw and hay bales, checkered tablecloths for later. Beth, the bride, pregnant belly rounded, glowing like a votive candle. Tom, her farmer-beau beaming like he’d inherited the earth.

We sat with the folks up in the rafters, catcalling even before the vows started.

The preacher was a local college professor—wore suspenders and wire-rims. He read from The Velveteen Rabbit. Said you know you’re real when the ones who love you wear your fur off and your button eyes are lost down to thread. Said love is what happens after the beautiful dreams come undone.

Beth and Tom said their vows, then hugged, then we all piled down in a group hug. Later we slow-danced near the pie table. Eleanor’s head tucked into the space between my shoulder and collarbone, her hand warm in mine. She smelled like sun and apple slices.

The music was fiddling, “Wildwood Flower” and a guitar so old it looked like driftwood. Best home-made buffet ever! We brought braised cauliflower and cheddar. There was rhubarb pie, chicken with mustard crust, warm bread home-made butter. Yumm!

We didn’t talk much on the ride home. Eleanor held my hand, leaned into my arm, and stared out the window like she wanted to find the whole world in view.

That tree—the cottonwood up there—we carved our initials into it before the wedding. Somewhere in the bark, that memory of us still exists. That’s why I came back today.

I don’t pretend to know ‘why’. I just come back each spring, because this is where joy once spilled over, a golden butterfly day, that wonderful barn wedding, and Eleanor.

That was a miracle. That we were there as a part of it. For that moment. Long passed.

# Pani Puri

When she was younger, before Bhairav, before the widowed sister and the school admissions and the careful money jars, Auntie Amma had wanted to open a sweets shop. Not a proper halwai's stall, no — she imagined something gentler, with clean tables, rose tea, and a radio playing Mohammed Rafi. She even had a name in mind: Sugars of the Sun.

Now, every morning, she tied her hair into a tight knot and stirred sugar into memory. She had a way of clinking the spoon twice on the rim before setting it down — just so.

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Ritual. Every pan meant something. Some were for wedding sweets, some for family treats. But all were set out this morning without explanation — a silent ritual.

Auntie Amma moved between them like a woman dancing the steps of a remembered life. She was not old, but age clung to her like turmeric to cotton — stubborn, fragrant, golden. The saffron and cardamom rose up, warming the tiled kitchen with memory.

“You want more chutney?” Amma asked, though the boy’s rice bowl was already full. She needed to ask something. The silence otherwise was too wide.

Her sister — the children’s mother — stirred lentils by the stove. Her hair was pinned back loosely, a braid falling over one shoulder. She wasn’t crying. Not today. Today was a good day.

They hadn’t spoken aloud about Bhairav since the letter from Los Angeles — the one that never confirmed anything, only suggested. “Unclaimed belongings.” “No body recovered.” It had been two monsoons ago. They never burned incense. There had been no shraddha ceremony. Only the quiet: the empty chair by the dining mat, and the names not spoken.

But still, they cooked. Because the children had to eat. Because their father — the banana-seller with a sweet tooth and sleepy eyes — needed breakfast before his walk to the market stalls. Because it was what Bhairav would have wanted, surely. Because it was what kept the family together: the food, the smells, the old enamel tins filled with jaggery and laughter and unspilled grief.

The girl giggled at the chutney’s curry sweetness. The boy tried to fold a pakwan like origami. Outside, parrots screeched from the pandanus trees. And in that kitchen, Auntie Amma cracked a fresh piece of varo and smiled her broken smile.

“Sweetness first,” she said, mostly to herself.

It was how she remembered him — the boy who had once run through this country kitchen, licking his fingers, calling her “Chef of Heaven.”

# The Banana Seller’s Dream

At the day’s final turn, when the sun folded its arms and leaned into the horizon, they moved to the verandah as they always did. The kitchen lay quiet now, every brass dish dried and turned upside down like a full moon cupped in copper. The last hiss of the pressure cooker had long since softened into memory.

Beyond the low wall, the jungle murmured — not loud, never loud, but constant, like a mother who hums even when the child is asleep. Cicadas pulsed. The flame of the oil lamp inside flickered in rhythm with the one outside, as though some old sadhu’s breath moved between them.

Anjali settled the hookah with the ease of a thousand evenings. She passed the hose to her banana merchant husband without words, only the lift of her brows. The adults spoke in low murmurs. Tea was poured in tumblers — not mugs, never mugs — the metal ones that sing a little when chai hits their sides.

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The children tittered with small jokes between them. A sweetness lingered on the tongue. Tamarind and jaggery. Coriander dust clung to the narrow space in Auntie Nim's fingernails.

And it was here, in this hush stitched together by fireflies and cardamom and old sandalwood stories, that the family became one. Not talking. Not planning. Just being.

He exhaled slowly through the hookah stem, the smoke ribboning upward, not urgent. It never was. The banana seller — *'Hey, Bappu'*, they called him, though his real name was Vishwanath — had walked those market lanes since he was a boy. Knew every stall, every haggle, every grandmother's voice. His back curved now, a soft comma from years of hauling banana bunches heavier than the arguments over their price.

As the coals glowed and chai settled into its second sip, he let his eyes half-close. The children's laughter echoed — a good sound, full of living. Beside him, Anjali poured chai with her left hand, never her right, a habit from temple days. She liked preparing it for him. The power to transform adversity with small favors.

Vishwanath leaned his head back. He was not a scholar. But he knew the Gita said something about doing one's dharma without desire for the fruit. What was a banana-seller if not proof? He had done his duty — sold sweetness to strangers, kept coins in the tin, never lied about ripeness.

But sometimes — only sometimes — he dreamed of being born a parrot, just once. Bright green, sharp-tongued, flying above the stalls with no weight at all — just flight, just his laughing voice. He never told her that. But Anjali knew.

Outside, the jungle murmured. Inside, the oil lamp held steady. And Vishwanath, banana-seller and dreamer, held the hose a moment longer, watching the smoke fade like karma: upward, curling, gone.

It was said, in the old books, that each day is born as a god — that Purushottama walks among us not with tumeric but with mace. The power to overcome with the miracle of *this* — a verandah facing the wild jungle, a family at rest, and a silence full of meaning.

# I Sell the Wind in Tiny Baskets

December in Taos smells of roasted chiles and snowmelt. The sky turns apricot around five o’clock, and by six the farolitos begin to flicker along the walls like tiny prayers that learned how to burn.

I lay out my offerings in silence. Each of them holds something—a worry, a wish, an answer no one asked aloud. Hummingbirds for the sick children. A horned toad for the soldier who hasn’t written home. A straw coyote for the divorcée who keeps pretending her laughter isn’t lonesome. I don’t price them. I just arrange them near the edge of the blanket, with some tiny woven baskets, and let the wind do the rest.

Across the plaza, Tío Julián balances a dancing skeleton on his knee, its arms out like it’s waiting for a slow waltz. “This *calaca* isn’t dead,” he tells the Oklahoma couple. “Just waiting for his guitar lesson.” They laugh like no one’s ever told them a good story before. The wife buys two. I bless them under my breath: *que no se rompan los huesos del alma* (that the bones of the soul do not break).

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At the tortilla stand, Teodoro—sixteen and full of secrets—watches his *abuela* thump the dough with her pin. “They think you’re performance art,” he whispers. Doña Gloria doesn’t look up. “*Pobrecitos*,” she mutters. “This is how we survived the Depression.” *Thwack!* The tourists applaud anyway.

The bells begin at six. Long and slow, like a mountain sigh. The vendors still for a moment. Even the grackles hush. And three stalls down, Señora Luján sells her “Christmas Cacti of Shame,” each one prickled with a tiny red sweater stitched with “SOY PENITENTE” in gold thread.

I see her then—Gloria in her apron, backlit by the glow of the stove, looking like a bronze saint. Julián lifts his *calaca* to the bells, and for a second it dances in the light. Luján folds her arms and hums something low and mean and maybe holy.

No one comes to my blanket. That’s all right. I never expect them to.

I never sell the hummingbirds. I place them near the edge of the blanket and wait. The tourists pass them by, looking for skeletons or cookies shaped like Texas. But sometimes a child will look back, once, and smile, or whisper to me, "I had a hummingbird too in the hospital,” and that’s enough.

The coyote’s straw ears catch the last pink glint from the mountains. The horned toad waits, belly full of salt and clove, heart sewn shut with thread that used to belong to my mother’s rosary, for the soldier who hasn’t written.

I wrap my shawl around my shoulders, gather what I’ll carry, and leave the rest. Sometimes they’re taken in the night, or maybe the earth swallows them up. Then I find them returned the next day, with a different prayer tucked inside. The straw coyote stays behind. The Soldier may return someday.

Tonight the wind is full of quiet names. The bell calls out six times, then hushes. And in the amber and pinking last light, as the farolitos flicker like tiny saints, I walk home slowly, leaving prayers in my footsteps like night-blooming Cereus.

Not to be found, so much, as not to be forgotten.

# Blue Scar

In the crooked-beamed snug of Yr Hen Grog — The Old Gallows — where the fire's eye blinked amber from its iron mouth, Idris and Taffy sat like slate gateposts, unmoved by time but eroded by it all the same. They leaned low over their plates, relaxing.

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The two old Welsh miners — *hen lowyr glo* in their tongue — had the look of granite, softened only by ale and age. Their sleeves were rolled to the elbow, showing the faint blue scars where coal dust worked into deep rockfall cuts. You could trace the veins of the valleys on their skin.

“It’s a good crust today,” Idris said, tapping the pie’s golden top. “Proper lard in it.”

“Not too thick,” said Taffy, already ladling custard into his mouth with the care of a man refilling his quietness. “Tad used to say a thick pie lid was for hiding a lie underneath.”

The server, white-haired and narrow-waisted, moved between tables with the grace of someone not born to the mine shaft. pouring gravy with the solemnity of a priest.

Behind them, the old clock ticked like cracked shale about to bust loose. Outside, a March wind snuck past the sill, whispering *oer y bore 'di cyrraedd* — “cold the morning’s come.” But in here it was warm, and amber-lit, and full of the kind of quiet that comes with winter’s chill.

“You remember Glenys?” Idris asked, eyes soft with chimney smoke and memory. “Glenys Jones. Sang like a lark in Capel Seion. She made pies even better’n these.”

“Dead now,” said Taffy, nodding. “Cancer took her. Shame.”

Their forks moved slowly. The fire spat. A man coughed from the darker corner. Their plates scraped clean, and they leaned back like men floating on old waters. The Italian came to clear them, sweeping away the dishes.

“Well then,” said Idris, watching a moth trace madness in the yellow bar light.

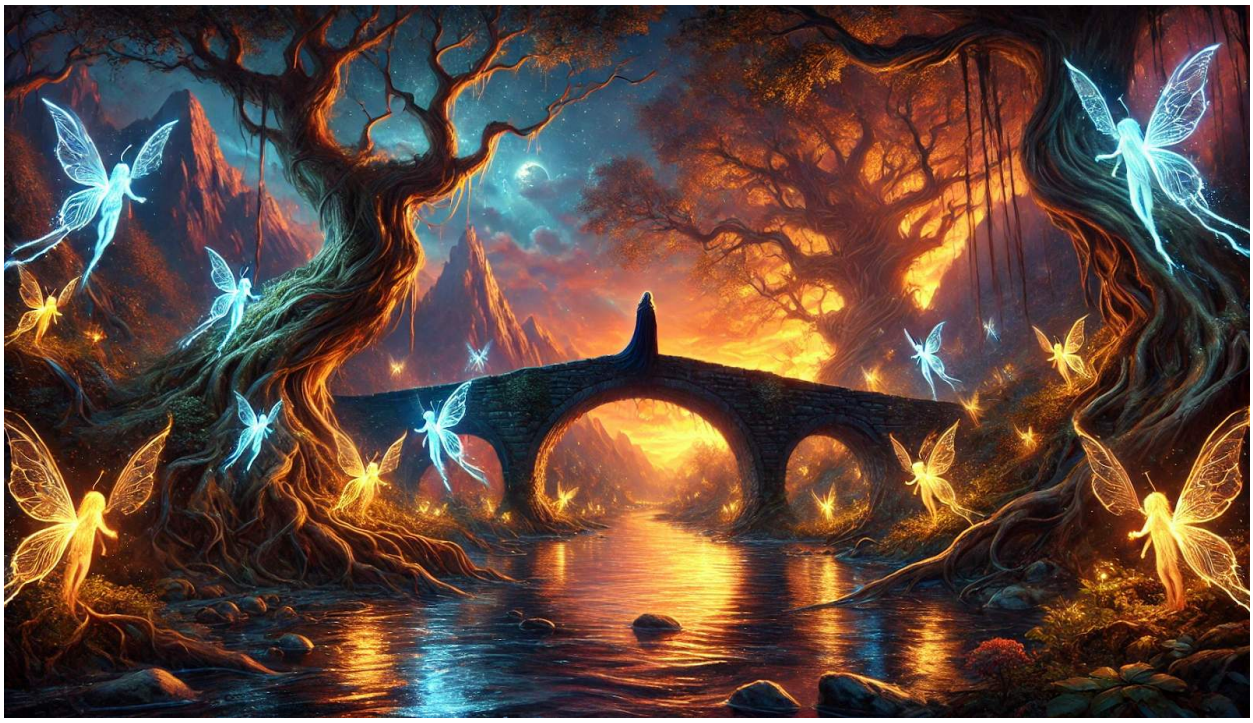
“Well then,” echoed Taffy, tapping a cigarette loose with his knuckles.

They shared the silence with their Guinness, like that old hymn *‘Here We Still Are’*.

“Still dream of the shaft,” Idris muttered. “Dream the black is climbing up me legs.”

“Me too,” said Taffy. “But in dreams we walk upright.”

# Amarcord Twilight



The bridge arched like the spine of some ancient beast, its stones worn smooth by centuries of wind and wandering feet. The soldier—though he scarcely remembered what that word meant now—stood motionless upon its crest, his cloak billowing in the evening's breath. The sun bled into the horizon, staining the sky the color of old wounds, while the moon, pale and watchful, hung above like a ghostly sentinel.

He had crossed this river once before, when the world still hummed with the promise of glory. The night before the battle, the generals had gathered them in the square, their uniforms crisp as new banknotes, their faces flushed with hope and certainty. The soldier—then a lanky farm  boy, had risen to captain later  among the ranks.

General Volkov, a bear of a man with a voice like gravel, had exorted them. "Tomorrow, we cross the bridge to attack," he declared. "By dusk, the enemy will be broken, and you will sup in their halls as victors!"

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A murmur ran through the men. Someone chuckled. The soldier remembered Petrov beside him, elbowing his ribs. "You hear that, little wolf? Supper in a castle. Maybe even a feather bed!"

But here, years later, standing on that same bridge, he could still hear the lie in their voices—the way it had curled around the edges of their boasts like rot in an apple.

Now, only memory answered him. The trees, gnarled and twisted as old men's fingers, leaned in as if to listen. The wind carried whispers—fragments of remembered voices he knew too well. Between the bridge and the river crossing, the dead are never silent.

He closed his eyes. The past rushed in like the river below, swift and unrelenting. When he opened them again, the twilight had deepened, the still air shimmered with delicate movement. Tiny winged figures, lit like fireflies, drifted upward from the water's edge. Faeries—so the local villagers called them.

But he knew better. They were the last embers of those who had once been flesh and blood, of men who fought beside him, and fallen with his name on their lips.

One hovered before him, its glow flickering like a florescent moss. For a heartbeat, he saw a face within the light—young, grinning, a smear of dirt across a freckled cheek. Petrov. The name struck him like a bayonet.

"You survived," the light seemed to say. "Why?"

The captain had no answer. He stood there in the fading light, alone, mute.

The faerie spirits spiraled higher, their radiance blending with the stars. Soon, they would vanish entirely, leaving only the bridge, the river, and the weight of all that had been lost.

# Chiaroscuro

The house in Fredericton had grown too quiet, but not in the sudden way—no slammed doors or emptied rooms, no drama of departure. Just a long soft fade, like the sound of snow falling. One day you notice the hallway clock ticks louder than it used to. You open drawers not to find something, but to be reminded that things still exist.

They had once been busy. He, with his lectures on Kierkegaard and quiet fires of discourse. She, with chalk-dusted fingers and slow, patient vowels, guiding new Canadian arrivals through the passages of their new lives. English, she told them, was a door they could learn to open. But the door had closed on their own routines, eventually, almost gently. His UNB department had "restructured." Her program, moved online. No one had asked whether they were ready for it.

Now they sat in the glow of three flames. Two candles on the table, and one lantern, wide and squat, brought out each winter like a ritual. She had placed it on the old milking stool they'd found at a farm sale years ago, back when they liked to claim lost

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things. The lantern threw their shadows against the wall — large, long, vaguely strange. As if they were watching older versions of themselves from some other room.

Her head leaned against his shoulder, the fabric of his sweater giving off the scent of cedar and the faintest trace of snow. He hadn't yet decided if he was sad. It was hard to tell. What he mostly felt was stillness. And the weight of the question that now hovered between them.

Her parents were gone. That had happened with a kind of decorum—no great suffering, no messy unraveling. A final postcard of cherry blossoms, then the call. Afterward, the will. And the house in Takayama, bequeathed. In autumn, the roof would be framed by red maple and pine.

She hadn’t asked outright. But she'd said it plainly, in the old way, offering the idea like tea: “We could go. There is the house now.”

He thought about it at night, mostly. About the small tiled stove. About the river that ran behind the house, smooth stones and shrines tucked into the mountains. About the way they might grow old differently, or perhaps not at all. To become folded into a new pattern, like leaves pressed between pages.

Her aunt had written a letter to them, years ago, in deliberate brushstrokes: *Nana korobi ya oki*. Fall seven times, stand up eight!

He hadn't understood it then. But he did now.

He looked at the flame, the way it danced but didn’t falter. Maybe it wasn’t about loss, or grief, or even nostalgia. Maybe it was about the shape a life could take when you let it change its form.

Outside, the wind pushed at the eaves. He turned to her, gently. “We could go,” he said.

And she smiled, as if she already knew.

# Kot Séprès Ka Dòmi (Where the Cypresses Sleep)

The bayou didn’t speak loud in winter. It whispered—fog drifting like a hush from a child’s mouth, cypress knees slick with frost, the water wearing a film of pale breath. A flatboat nudged along the black mirror edge, slow and reverent, oars creaking just once before resting again. On it sat two men, side by side but not touching, one younger than winter wheat, the other older than rusted tin.

“You throwin’ long,” the older man said, nodding without looking.

“Reckon I picked up a few tricks,” the boy replied, feathering the cast so the line dropped light as a funeral flower onto the glass. The lure—a red-and-white spinner—kissed the water where the mist blurred the edges of things.

Grandaddy Lee wore his fatigue jacket, frayed at the cuffs, with a patch faded into memory. He smelled of tobacco and clean sweat, a man made of hickory and sorghum. His grandson, Boone, wore new camouflage—different pattern, same ghosts.

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They fished without a bobber. That was Lee's way. Said the strike should surprise you, like truth or grief. The silence grew fat with sounds: a heron's shriek like a saw in bone, the ripple of something curious beneath.

Boone caught the first bass, heavy and dark with a belly soft as a peach. He held it like something he hadn't earned. Lee nodded but didn't praise. Praise was for things that needed shoring up, and Boone wasn't that kind of boy.

"Funny," Boone said after a time, thumbing the bass's gills before letting it slide back into the dark. "You don't think about it 'til you're back, how quiet home is. There, even the silence feels like it's hiding something."

Lee glanced at him, eyes the color of old pennies. "Every place hides something. The trick's knowin' whether to dig or just let it be." He spat a stream of brown into the water. "Ain't no shame in walkin' past a grave."

They cast again, lines unspooling like untold stories over the black water. The lures vanished into the fog—one, then the other—as if the bayou had opened its mouth and swallowed them whole. For a moment, there was nothing. Then the faintest ripple, the barest tremor along the line. Not a strike. Not yet. Just the water holding its breath.

Boone flexed his fingers, feeling the cold. The same cold that had bitten him in the desert, in the mountains, in all the nowhere places he'd been sent. But this cold was different. This cold belonged to him.

Lee grunted, adjusting his grip on the rod. "Ain't no hero's welcome for catfish," he said. "Just hungry water and dumb luck."

Boone smiled. The line twitched again.

# The Rainmaker’s Daughter

The Quad was a cathedral of pink. Cherry blossoms clung to April-wet branches, their petals trembling in the drizzle like hesitant applause. Fle’ur-814 sat perfectly still on the stone planter, her pearl-coated fingers curled around the umbrella’s handle.

Professor Wurlitzer, (Thad to friends) her creator, had said: “Here, Fle-ur, take this umbrella  Go out on the Quad. Enjoy the cherry blossoms, then give me your thoughts.”

He was the director of Rainmaker Dynamics, funded through the University robotics research program. She had been powered on in silence, not with a triumphant chord or test sequence, but with Wurlitzer humming Leonard Cohen as he calibrated her ocular servos. Her process tag was RD#403d4b-43444a-414814. She was in a special series, a completely autonomous cyber-being, #5261696E6D616B6572-814. Wurlitzer called her Fle’ur-814, or just Fle’ur. She was his joy and laughter, born with beauty and grace.

‘What would you like me to think about, then”, she asked, whirring quirky on purpose.

Thad quoted, “Crocuses remind us of the promise of spring, their blooms are a vibrant testament to the seasonal transformation — you’re a kind of transformation, Fle’ur.”

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“Then I will return with a transactional tale of the Crocus symbol in Spring, and I will be his Smilax love. We shall grow comfortably old together and then become immortal!” she grinned, and grabbed an umbrella out of the rack.

Outside, the rain watered the flowers — gentle, steady, typical for Puget Sound.

Fog condensed on her opalescent carbon fiber skin as she sat in the slow drizzle. “I saw the sunset ere men saw the day,” she recited to no one, her voice a wind chime made of silver wires, aimlessly crossed. “Who am too wise in that I should not know.”

Poetry module had been Wurlitzer’s indulgence. A flourish, he called it. She was the only Fle’ur unit with poetry. She didn’t understand why wisdom would preclude knowing, but the words flowed mellifluously from her synth-voice subroutine, looping softly.

A student in a hoodie stopped. “You look like you’re off to see the Wizard!” he smiled.

Fle’ur-814 tilted her head. “I am not lost,” she said.

The boy grinned. “Could’ve fooled me. But you *are* missing those ruby slippers.”

She glanced down. Her feet were bare, pearl alloy gleaming under the rain-slick. “They were not stolen,” Fle’ur-814 objected, not quite sure if that was answering his question.

He choked on a laugh. “Okay, definitely not a Dorothy. Hey, my name’s Zain. This feels like I wandered into a Studio Ghibli film. Or maybe an old Doordarshan sci-fi serial.”

Fle’ur-814’s processors whirred. She turned. “You’re the Scarecrow Darshan, then?  And you are seeking a brain, neh?” She pointed to the library tower, its windows glowing like a beacon. “That is your Emerald City, Zain of Darshan.”

Zain stared at her. Then at the tower. Back at her. “Why are you waiting here, then?”

“For the rain to stop,” then softly, ”Under my feet, the moon glides along the river.”

“It’s April in Seattle weather,” Zian shrugged. “It won’t,” not knowing what else to say.

Above them, a cherry blossom let go. It spun twice in the air before landing on the back of Fle’ur-814’s delicate pearlescent hand. She gazed down at it for a long time.

“Then I will wait to become wise.”

# The Lost Folio

The morning had come in soft, like warm fresh bread. Through the window panes, sunbeams fell in honeyed diagonals, dust motes dancing like lazy prophets.

It was Tuesday — or so the calendar said — but in the house at the end of Windmere Hollow, where Jeanette did her kitchen homeschool, days had their own names.

This day was called “Mocking Girl.”

“Why is it called that?” asked Lucie, pencil paused mid-air, her brows stitched.

“Because on this day,” Jeanette smiled, “the wind listens to our laughter.”

Lucie turned her head, half-believing.

Her little brother Cal, who had been watching his toes swing under the table, blinked and asked, “The wind laughs too?”

“Let’s try laughing with it,” Jeanette said, and let out a big laugh — long and silly.

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Lucie joined in, then Cal, waving his arms like wings, rising and falling, louder then softer, then gasping with joy.

The kitchen table was an ark: open foliobooks, jars of colored pencils, a chipped enamel mug that still held the faint scent of cinnamon.  Along the sill, sprigs of rosemary and thyme. A basket of lemons waited without urgency. The bookshelves leaned with history — not curated, just lived. A blue kettle murmured on the stove behind them.

Today's lesson was not about fractions or grammar rules. It was about **maps**.

Not the ones that chart highways or state capitols — but the kind made of crayons and questions and family stories.  The kind you find years later in a dusty drawer, and say, *Oh yes… I remember this place.*

"Here is where Grandma lived," Jeanette said, drawing a tidy garden house on a clean sheet of folio paper. "She made stars out of old buttons, remember?"

Lucie nodded. "She made the alphabet of buttons too. I liked her letter M the best!" She drew their house beside Grandma's, all full of clouds, with the letter 'L' over the door..

"And here," Jeanette continued, drawing a market stand, brushing a curl behind Lucie's ear, "is where I met your Dad. He brought me something special when we first talked."

"What was it?" Cal demanded. Jeanette drew an open book by the market stand.

She smiled. "A little book of poems. One line said, 'Hope is the thing with feathers.'"

Cal pointed straight-armed to the sky outside the window. *"Feathers are birds!"*

"That's right," Jeanette said gently. "And hope is like a little feathered bird inside us."

Lucie started writing Cal's words down, slowly:  $F — E — A — T — H — E — R — S \ldots$ She liked the way the 2B pencil dragged softly over paper, how it left a trail behind, like breadcrumbs through a story. $A — R — E \quad B — I — R — D — S.$

"Look, Mom!" she waved her folio book.

Outside, the back yard rippled in dappled light. A jaybird squawked from a branch — then repeated itself a beat later, just a little off. It hopped onto the windowsill, snatched a peanut from the dish, and flicked its tail like it had a secret.

Lucie paused. “Did you hear that?”

“There she is,” Jeanette whispered. “The mocking girl.”

“She’s a bird?”

“She’s part of the clowns,” Jeanette said, correcting herself. “I mean — the *clouds*. But she acts like a clown sometimes. She repeats things so that we’ll notice her.”

So Lucie wrote: *M— O— C— K— I— N— G  G— I —R— L*, and drew a bird, her feathers striped, standing on a peanut, saying something only other birds could understand.

Cal scribbled a swirl and swoosh of colors and held it up proudly. “This is our house in a storm. That’s the bird. The mocking girl flies inside the house to be safe!”

Time had folded into itself — quiet, invisible, passing. After lunch came story hour, then milk and cookies. Then naps. Lucie and Cal curled up with blankets and their housecat.

Jeanette stayed behind in the kitchen, washing slowly, the way you do when you don’t want a good day to end. She smiled that Guy’d agreed they wanted homeschooling.

She looked down at Lucie’s foliobook. The page was still open where she’d been writing.

At the bottom, in careful pencil:  *A —W— E— L— O— N— E.*

Jeanette smiled, soft and proud.  She’d help Lucie fix the spelling later. But the meaning — that part was already perfect.

Outside, the mocking girl called again — once to the day, once to the dusk, and once more, as if she were tucking the day itself into bed. Their new folios were gathered up with the rest that Jeanette was saving for when their children were teens, … then gone.

None of them lost.

# Green Tea

The infants lay in their glowing cradles like small, unfinished prayers. Through the glass of the neonatal observation window, Miao-yi stood shoulder to shoulder with Vichara, their white lab jackets pressed together at the seams. Between them, silent and steady, stood Âbsâréa.

She was ten now. Taller than most, solemn in posture, and serene in her pale green hair that shimmered faintly under the nursery's ambient lights. Her eyes—clear, almond-shaped—studied the scene with neither surprise nor sentiment. Inside, twelve newborn girls, each with the same translucent hue to their hair, their skin aglow in a

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bioluminescent wash of soft mint light. Each lay nested in its own sterile cocoon, monitors blinking, IV trees humming gently.

To a stranger, it might have looked like a miracle—or a mistake. But to Miao-yi, it felt like the return of something long lost. Not a recurrence, but a reverberation. An echo of intention.

The glass reflected them faintly—three silhouettes, three generations of science and secrecy. And love.

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In her twenties, Miao-yi's world had been full of sequence maps and pipettes, the clinical poetry of CRISPR edits and epigenetic toggles. Vichara, her husband, had walked into her life carrying a genome-wide methylation report under one arm and a flask of weak black tea under the other. He was from Phnom Penh. He loved stories. She loved structure. Their love grew like fungus: hidden, intricate, quietly brilliant.

After one long clinical year in Seoul, she took to practicing the Japanese tea ceremony at dusk. It calmed her, more than meditation, more than wine. Vichara would sit across from her, sipping quietly, as if the matcha tasted of something unspoken. Their days were filled with patient trials, gene loss mapping, post-chemo cognitive regression. But the tea—there was something in it. Tea drinkers seemed different. More themselves.

She joked once, "Maybe it's a gene." He said nothing.

Later that night, he returned from the lab with readouts and said, "What if it is?"

It took two years of quiet work. Mapping plant RNA. Finding compatibility. Funding the South Korean lab under an alias. They used mice first. Spliced the tea's sequences into early embryonic code. The first mouse lived three years. Never anxious. Solved mazes like easy riddles. Its fur shimmered faintly green in the lab lights.

When Miao-yi offered one of her harvested eggs as the next subject, Vichara hesitated for less than a second.

Nine months later, Âbsâréa was born under halogen lights in a borrowed delivery suite in Taichung. She did not cry. She blinked, looked straight at her mother, and cooed with something between recognition and invitation.

---

By two, she spoke five languages. By four, she corrected her preschool teacher's logic puzzle. She loved silence. She preferred ritual. She did not sleepwalk—but at night she would rise and sit quietly by the window, watching the stars as if listening for instructions.

They harvested more of Miao-yi's eggs. Each embryo carried the same edited fusion. They implanted them in surrogates, staggered by weeks. All were born female. All with the same green shimmer.

By the time Âbsâréa turned ten, there were twelve green-haired elvens.

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Tonight, the girls sat together in their shared room. Twelve urchins in a ring on the soft green rug. The walls were painted with trees and floating koi. Toys were tidied on shelves. A wallpaper of joy. But the light in the room shimmered subtly.

Miao-yi watched from the hall. Vichara stood beside her, hand on the doorframe.

Inside, Âbsâréa sat cross-legged, eyes closed. Her small voice sang—not words, but tones, gently rising and falling like breath. Around her, the younger girls mirrored her posture, their movements faintly synchronized.

None of them opened their eyes.

A circuit. A resonance.

"What are they doing?" she whispered.

"Listening," said Vichara.

Maybe the real answer came from somewhere else beyond the stars.

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Later, in bed, Miao-yi lay awake, staring at the ceiling. Her hand rested on her chest, as if to still a trembling that came from nowhere she could name.

She remembered the taste of matcha. The ceremony. The soft hiss of whisk against ceramic. The first time Âbsâréa laughed. The green shimmer in the mouse's fur. The way the girls swayed tonight, like leaves in a gentle breeze.

What had they made? Not a cure for aging. Not even a human-plant healthcare breakthrough. A new beginning.

And somewhere between genes and green tea, memory and meditation, something ancient had returned, a voice not heard in eons.

The world would ask one day. Would blame it. Hate it. Fear it. *Burn the Witches!*

But for now, the future could wait a little while. Could breathe a little more softly.

# The Man Who Drew Ladders

I only came in for some chai.
The vendor knows me. Everyone knows me, I'm Babu the mango picker. The best.

The street vendor likes me sitting there early in theearly  evening. It will draw in traffic.
"How is your brother, Ramu?" he asks, wiping his hands on a rag.

He's more interested in Ramu anyway. Ramu is my older brother. After our sisters were married off and gone to Mumbai, Ramu inherited my father's 5 hectares. It will grow anything, really, especially the tomatoes and peppers that Ramu supplies to the local markets and food vendors. They love Ramu.

Ramu inherited the homestead after my father Rahul died. He was the best coconut harvester in Ratnagiri province. With only a twisted foot loop of *coir* and *rattan*, he'd climb the highest palms, 15 meters, even 20 meters tall. Rahul's father, our grandfather, was still alive but an invalid. Rahul wanted to show he could support our whole extended family, even my grandfather and grandmother. He worked very hard.

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Anyway, that's how Rahul died. Way up in some tree. A tractor moving totes and pallets backed into the tree he'd climbed. He was so intent on picking, that he lost his foot-hold and fell. It took several days for him to die. The plantation owner gave my grandfather ₹10,000 in rupees. That was the price for an accidental death back then.

"So how's your brother, Ramu," he says again. I told him Ramu is developing a new fruit, one nobody has ever tasted before, one that he grows in old leaky water jars. Then I finished my chai and slid ₹10 toward him. That's the price for a street chai. "No, no!" he insisted, "Wait for your *ragda pattice*! Tell me about this new fruit!"

So I told him I found it in the jungle one day, picking *alphonsos*. Those are the most expensive mangoes, so they let you take more time. I spotted the flower and fruits, and after we finished for the day, dug the plant up and brought it to Ramu. His wife, my sister in law, Leela, was happy to have someone adult to talk to, as he planted it.

Ramu took some fertile soil and filled an old water jar. The transplant grew like weeds. It had fine orange flowers. They opened at dusk and seemed to breathe. When you stood among them, and smelled their fragrance, time slowed — or felt like it did! The sweet fruits from it were like *jujubes*, but bigger, like *kumquats*.

Ramu got ₹100 a dozen for them, so his 'eyes got big'. He made a deal with the local water jar potter and ordered 18 pots. I know, crazy. 18! He collected the fruit seeds and soon had his 18 transplants in 18 pots, turning out rupees like a coffee grinder!

That's when I should have kept my mouth shut. See, Leela's sister Lelani was at the house when I stopped by. She doesn't like me, because I'm still single. I think she talks behind my back. That makes me brag more about being the top mango picker.

"Yeah, well, my mangoes sell for ₹1800 a dozen in Mumbai! If Ramu had any smarts, he'd sell his flower-fruits in the jar to rich people for their estates, to show to guests!" *₹10,000 rupees!* I should not have said that. We can't take our words back.

Right, so Ramu had to play 'The Man of Mystery®.' He bought chalk at the market, and started scribbling math all over on the walls, strange hieroglyphs and formulas he had learned, in the short time he had been in school, before our father, you know, died.

دونوں اطراف کے مربعوں کا مجموعہ اخترن کے مربع کے برابر ہے۔ ایک مثلث کی بنیاد ڈپریشن زاویہ کے ترچھے اوقات کا گناہ ہے. مثلث کے تین زاویوں کا مجموعہ 180 ڈگری ہے۔

Stuff like that. Leela pulled her hair. "You're not thinking right! Have you ever been to the city? Do you know how far away the city is! *I can't believe you listen to Babu!"*

Ramu loftily iced her with a stare. "You'll see. I will find the distance with science!"

Lelani, seeing the beehive she had churned up, made an excuse to not visit for awhile. Leela pointed toward the market and yelled at me. OUT! Then her kids started to cry.

OK, so, from what I heard and saw from a distance, going back and forth after work, Ramu started chopping bamboo on our 5 hectares, not clearing the land, but making a scaffold he could climb on. Leela did her best to cook and take care of the kids and water the plants, but how could she harvest their tomatoes and peppers to sell in the market? Where could she leave the children? They still owed for the 18 water jars!

Ramu was *in the vibe*. Slowly his skeleton bamboo scaffold reached higher and higher. I stopped by when I knew Leela would be at the market. "Ramu, who's going to climb that thing? You're afraid of heights since Dad died. He asked you, but then you ran away!"

Right, I should learn to keep my mouth shut. Ramu realized he couldn't see over the tree tops, so he'd have to build his scaffold higher and higher. Grasping, sweating, clutching tight the ladder, pleading to his gods. Each new tier of scaffold swaying like a prayer.

At last one day he said he was finished. He showed me, scratching with chalk on the side of a water jar how the math went. Then with a rude pair of wooden calipers, like our grandfather would have carved with the tools we still kept, and with an iron chisel he scratched out the marks for a rude चाँदा (*chanda)* for measuring geometry angles.

Tools in a *kamarband*, he began to climb. When Ramu reached tree-top level his knees began to shake. His grip was frozen so tightly, that he had to look straight at the distant clouds to keep from fainting. Up there, it wasn't the wind that unsteadied him. It was the closeness of something vast — like being near the beating heart of the divine.

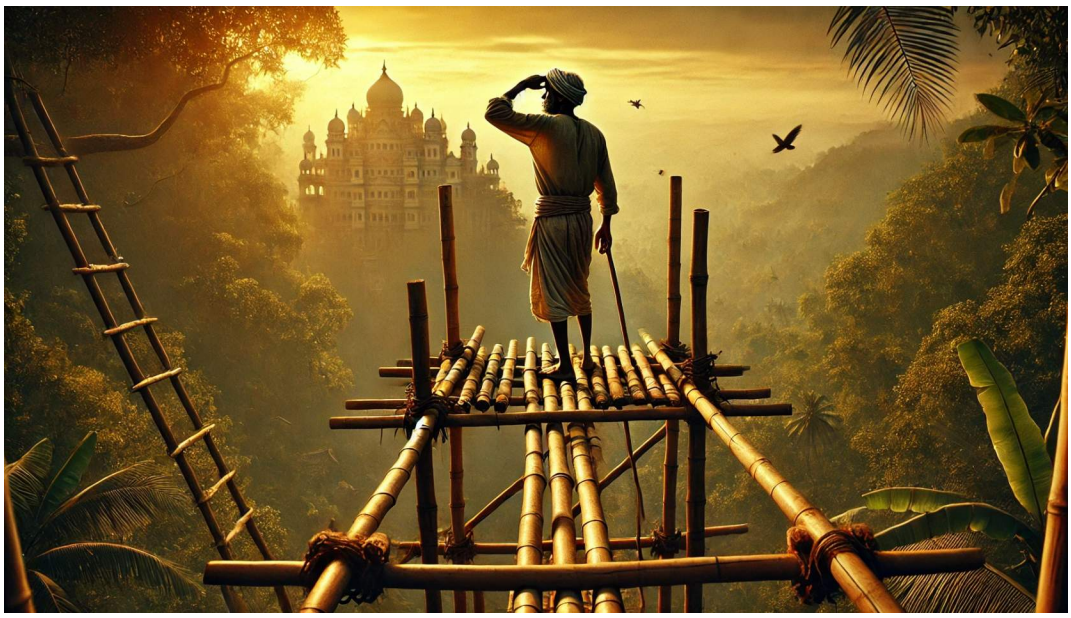
"What can you see!?" I bellowed up at him, far above. I don't think he heard me.

"Husband," Leela shouted, "Tell me, are you near enough to touch Heaven?"

Ramu turned at the sound of his beloved wife's voice to shout down, "Almost there!" But in turning he changed his grip, and in looking down, lost his balance, and from that great height, like our poor father, he plunged to his death right at our feet. In the dust, scattered among the shattered science, were bits of chalk and torn sketches — his *chanda* and caliper, his impossible plan, blurred like dreams in sudden waking.

Leela, having now a dead husband, three hungry children, a garden she couldn't maintain, and 18 water jars, remarried to the jar maker, who got his 18 jars back.

I, Babu, brother of Ramu, son of Rahul, am still the fastest mango picker in Ratnagiri!



# The Boy Who Could Hear Stars

They said Anun was born during the night the stars fell. Not one or two, as in a wishful tale. But hundreds, streaming across the dark like glowing threads unwinding from the sky. The elders lit incense and muttered old prayers. The dogs would not stop barking.

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And when the boy came — quiet, eyes wide, breath like wind through reeds — his mother wrapped him in wool and did not speak his name for seven days.

Not out of fear. Out of reverence.

He was different from the first breath. He did not cry. He did not babble. He watched. He listened. Even as a toddler he would sit for hours on the stone steps, chin in hand, gazing skyward like an old man remembering a name.

His uncle called it *stillness*. His mother called it *tuning*. “He’s hearing things we can’t,” she’d say, while weaving. “Give him time. He’ll speak when the stars finish whispering.”

The villagers said it was a blessing, then said it was odd, then stopped saying anything.

By the time he was seven, Anun had begun drawing. Not pictures of sheep or mountains or mothers and sons. But long curling maps, spiraled with lines and dots and tiny inked marks — like waveforms, or languages no one could read.

He drew them in the dust, and with soft stone on the walls of the sheep pen.

When asked what they were, Anun would only shrug. “They’re what I hear.”

So they nicknamed him *Erqe-rinri*, the boy who hears the stars.

At ten, Anun still didn’t speak much, but what he heard — and what he drew — began to matter. Maps no one could see at first. Spirals with branching paths, filled with rising notches and arcs like cloud movements.

He’d climb the cliffs above the village just before dawn. Sit for hours with his ear pressed against the stone, his body stilled to such quiet that even the birds did not flinch near him. Then he’d stand to face the sun, his fingers lacing maps in the air.

“They’re not echoes,” he told his mother once. “Not wind, not water. It’s deeper.”

His maps became more organized. Grids. Pulses. Movements of the moon. Curved notations that seemed to shift with the seasons. The village schoolteacher, who had once studied physics, thought it looked like wave interference. Sound signatures.

She gave Anun a box of chalk sticks to draw with. “You’re imagining wonderful things,” she said. *“Quizás dibuje alguno para nosotros con tiza.”* (Perhaps draw them for us.)

Villagers started asking him questions, then. But not directly. They’d stop him on the trail, or leave berries by his door. One farmer brought him an egg wrapped in cloth.

“What does this one mean?” they asked, pointing to his latest design, carved with charcoal into a piece of scrap wood. “Should we wait a week to plant this year?” Another insisted he answer, "Will my black-faced ewe have one lamb, or two?”

Anun only blinked. “They’re not mine,” he said again. “They’re only what I *hear*.”

But word spread and soon others came from far-off villages to inquire of the village priest where the famed *Erqe-Rinri* lived, and where they could worship his abilities.

When the storms started coming out of season, at first villagers blamed the wind. When their mountain goats gave birth in midwinter and the lambs died, they called it *malo*. But when the priest fell ill — the one who had scoffed, said the boy’s silence was arrogance, said his drawings were devil work — people began to whisper.

“He hears things we cannot. He knows of calamities! Maybe he is a witch?”

The cathedral bell fell three days later, crashing through the steeple into the *dais*.

After that, they stopped calling him *Erqe-rinri*. They started calling him *star-witch*, *stone-listener*, *ghost-son*. Someone placed burnt salt outside his mother’s door sill.

And then came the meetings. The pueblo gathered in secret as they worked to repair the church steeple and rehang the bell that tolled every Sunday across the valley.

Voices a low murmur like bees trapped under a bowl. Anun stood at the edge, bare feet cold on the earthen floor, beside his mother. No one looked at him directly.

Too many unlucky things. Too many strange drawings. The weather was turning at odd times. The village was out of sync with nature and now it seemed, with an angry God, punishing them for their blasphemy.

“It isn’t *us* who changed,” Anun said, surprising everyone as he stood at the doorway, in the shadow, in the quiet place between coming and going, between repentance and forgiveness. The blessing threshold.

His voice was soft. Clear. “It’s the stars. You just weren’t listening.”

Anun and his mother left the village in spring.

Not with ceremony, nor violence — just silence. A silence thick as river clay. Only his mother’s sandals slapping the dust. Only the tether-ropes of the mule creaking.

A few children watched them go from behind a crumbling wall. One of them, a girl with wind-burnt cheeks, raised a hand in farewell, then turned and ran away.

No one else did. Like the moon quietly passing into the dawn of a new day.

The village had no word for banishment. Only the old Quechuan phrase for '*sent beyond the maize*'. To the high ground. Past where the stone terraces end.

There, in a sheep-herder's hut no bigger than a goat stall, Anun and his mother made a new life. Clay stove. Flat stones for sleeping. Rain cairn, to melt ice and snow in.

Anun's mother began to speak less. So did he.

They no longer needed words.

He climbed higher each night. Past the ridges marked by llamas, into the places no herder bothered with. He pressed his face to the rock. Not only to listen now — but to feel. The earth had breath, and it rose and fell like a dreamer in sleep.

Then Anun would return at dawn with roots and bulbs he dug, and with snow to melt.

One night, there was no moon. Only stars. And they *sang*.

Not as music. Not as language. As *pattern*. A weaving of pulses that turned and turned, like a knot unraveling in reverse. As if they were speaking backwards.

He still drew with his fingers in the air. Dancing. The way the priest once moved his hands in blessing the pueblo. The way his mother combed her hair. The gestures that meant something, from before we knew what meaning was.

Invisible spirals. A slow cymatic choreography.

The sky *watched him back*.

He didn't notice, at first, what changed. Only that the animals began moving oddly. That the llamas turned their heads to the sky before storms came. That pumas didn't cat-call at night. That the stone birds carved in the old walls — they seemed different. The way the light hit them. Their shadows no longer aligned with the seasons.

His mother said little. She watched him as one watches someone waking from sleep.

Carefully. Gently.

*“Erqe-rinri,”* she whispered once, placing her hand to his cheek. “What do the stars say of you and me now?”

“They don’t speak of our future,” he replied, “They speak of *becoming the wind*.”

He drew a new map. The largest he had ever made. Not in chalk, nor in dirt — but in cairns. Stacked stones across a distant ridgeline. Markers. Pointers. A great curving arc that aligned with no star-chart anyone had ever seen.

Then he sat in silence at its center. Even the ceaseless Andean wind went silent.

When his mother died that winter, Anun buried her beneath the cairn that pointed true East. The mountain held her breath now. The sky would carry her spirit, in the winds.

And still Anun listened. For what? *For what!?*

Below, in the valley where his pueblo turned against him, the weather grew strange. Clouds no longer obeyed the mountains, and swirled in huge dark billows threatening flood. But then, despite prayers and offerings, the rain never came. Dogs barked at empty paths filled with spirits. Elders lit incense and muttered incantations.

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Years passed in silence and confusion. The villagers began to doubt. To fear they were lost, had cast out a se’er, and were now plagued with invisible daemons.

One day a satellite failed, disintegrating as it fell. Then another. Then five more, all in a night. Atacama observatories called it, ‘*Estoy cansado’*, the satellites ‘were tired’. They could find no reason for it, in their huge telescopes that can ‘see back to Big Bang.’

Satellite communications began to fail. NASA uplinked new commands to Star Link, but now no data came back. Soon the world would become silent too. In the old way.

In cities, people felt it first as static electricity. Phones that wouldn’t stop humming. Dogs pacing doorways. Birds flying at dusk in spirals no one could explain. The sun even flickered once, like a skipped frame in an old film reel!

High in the Andes, Anun stood among his cairns, his bare feet steady on frostbitten stone. He did not shiver. He did not blink.

He simply turned his face to the sky. Waiting.

The wind dropped to nothing. And then the mountain *sang*.

Not aloud, not in language — but in that old, old voice of pattern. The same voice he'd followed since he could crawl. His arms rose, tracing loops in the darkness. Spirals.

The great signature of motion. Not to warn. Not to summon. But to *meet*.

A bloom of light unfolded across the stars. Not falling — *calling*. And the ground trembled beneath him, not in fear, but in recognition. Like a tuning fork when another rings near to it. Like a bell, struck across eons. Stone answering sky. Rocks remembering when they were first born in fire.

The sky trembled. Not with fire. Not with ruin. But with a sound like memory.

The sky opened then. Stars began to fall. Like autumn leaves of comets.

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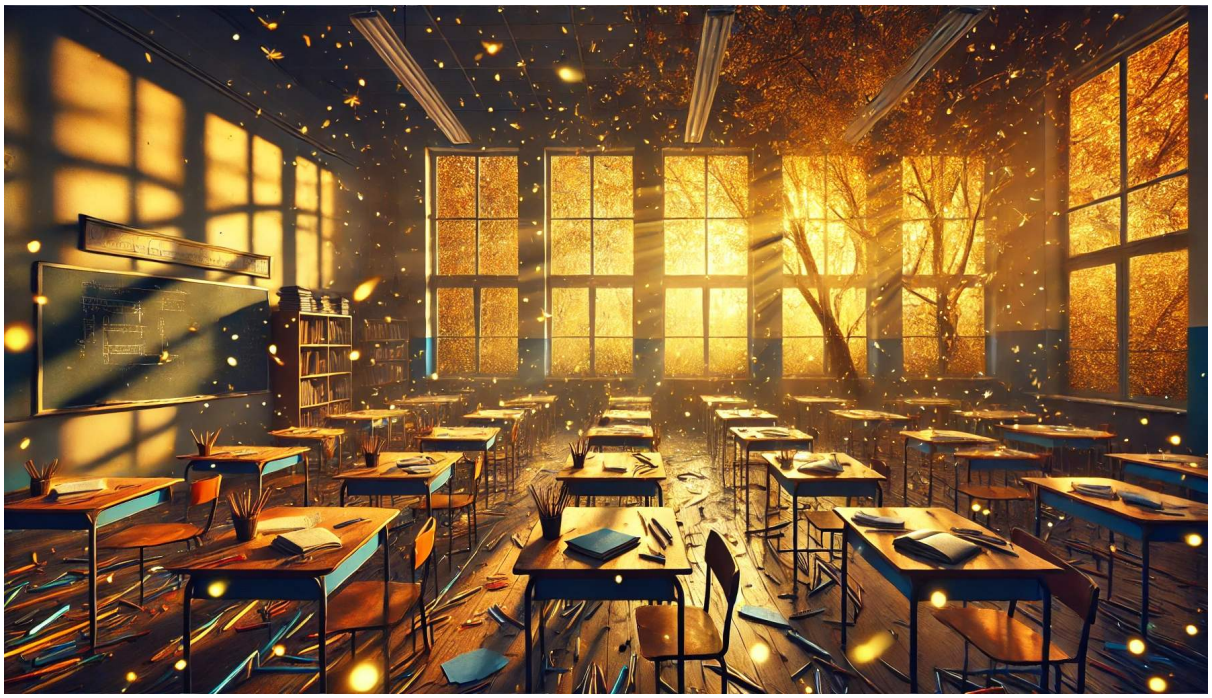
*They said you could hear the stars*
*whoosh through the air,*
*crackling in odd sounds,*
*like glass ornaments tinkling,*
*or icicles when they break and fall.*

# Circle Game



I'm standing at my classroom window, late in the day, when the world has already tilted toward the commute. The desks are scattered with pencils and unfinished exit slips, curled corners of paper that seem to breathe in the fading amber light.

I should clean up, but I can't seem to look away.

October has its own way of lingering—its sun a kind of gold that softens everything it touches. Chalk dust floats in shafts across the room, motes sun-glinting to catch my attention, brightening, dimming, as if they were tiny signals from some invisible language. For a heartbeat I imagine them as fireflies, out of season, out of time, writing brief stories in the air.  But the motes hold me still. They wink at me, these tiny, impossible things, as if they know a secret about this room that I've forgotten.

It was a good day. I felt it in the way my students bubbled with chatter, sketching costume ideas on the margins of worksheets, whispering jokes to each other. Their

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chaos is never the same from one day to the next—sometimes jagged, sometimes unruly, but always alive. Today it felt like spark. I could have hushed them, could have drawn them back into straight rows and bullet points, but instead I let the energy play itself out. Perhaps teaching is less about order than about noticing when the light bends just so, when the moment itself glimmers.

*Ms. K, do you believe in ghosts?* I saw their eyes light up like beacons.

I used to. I used to believe in heroes, too—knights and saints and fools who charged at windmills with nothing but a wooden sword. I read them Cervantes last week, the old story thick as honey in my mouth. *Do children today even have real heroes?*

In our lessons, we try to pass down legends. We read them of Three Kingdoms and betrayals on ancient bridges, the noble hero pierced at last by a daemon blade. They scarcely listen. One yawns and fidgets. Another chews the splintered end of a pencil. There's Bridget, a scrape on her new Adidas, tracing the scabbed line as if it were the only story worth telling. And we, bearers of myths, feel a pang—how can they be so unmoved, so untouched by our old dramas? Do they even have heroes anymore?

Perhaps their indifference is not emptiness, but overflow. To them, the idea of the dying hero is less vivid than the rush when they spin until the ground tilts. Perhaps the stories they need are the ones they write with their own feelings, circling faster, chanting louder, refusing to sit still for the slow march of narrative. Their games hold reason too, though abstract to us—rituals written in the code of their generation. We misread them when we imagine those games are meaningless.

The district office says we must measure SEL Student Joy now. *True!* They've given us rubrics, spreadsheets, boxes to check: *Engagement. Participation. Enthusiasm.* Last week, I threw the lesson plan out the window and let students run wild in the school-yard instead. They spun in circles until they collapsed, grass-stained and gasping, their laughter rising. Then we fingerpainted Science. *So much fun!*

There are flickers, like that, when a sunbeam brushes the day. Between them lie a thousand states, some light, some dark. Then the scolding administration, selling their tomato-soup filled with alphabet words—thick with them—but no tomatoes.

On some days, darkness peers in through narrow cracks: the squabbles of parents, the slow grind of systems that drain curiosity. I see these shadows in the edges of the PD training, glassy-eyed meetings, where spark is tossed for 'intersectionalism'. The children sense it—of course they do. They shrug it off, not because they are blind but because they prefer to weave their own rules out of rhythm and breath.

The Principal says, *"You're not to refer to yourselves as teachers. You're instructors of the Central Curriculum. Your task is to maintain classroom order, and keep your students' heads down on their 'Read & Repeat!' Individualized Lesson Plans."*

I saw their eyes die. Instead of running in yelling and laughing, they came in late. So I cheated, OK? 'Class, today we're going to write stories together." A hand went up, "What kind of stories, Ms K?" That was Ayesha. She needs to know 'what kind of's.

"We're going to make up our own real story," I held up the chalk, then drew a long horizontal line. They went silent. I drew the silhouette of a city skyline, then a second closer profile of bodegas and bars, store-front churches and even a corner gas station. There were trees and park benches, a stick figure boy and girl, and a stick figure dog.

"Jacques and Sofia went to the bodega with their dog Mutter, to buy some mangoes."

I handed out boxes of chalk to each row, and backhand-waved, pass them around. They waited until I whispered: "...and then what happened?" pointing to the board.

Hands flew up, students were chosen, a few at a time, and they raced up to the board to write the next lines in our storybook. Then we all read them together, and I drew more characters and scenes. "...and then what happened?" Again. Again. Whirling. For their

exit-slip, I had them finish their story, as they would have intended it to. Dillon, our Asberger's special needs, observed drily, "These are not real stories."

Like I said, it was a 'good' day. 'Make lemonade', right? By the time I finally gathered my things, the light outside had deepened to a cool indigo. The dust in the classroom has settled. I carry the heat of the day with me, a quiet hum that learning is less a straight path than a circle, always spiraling outward, always returning again.
Out in the yard, I imagine them again: children spinning beneath trees, their laughter rising like breath in autumn fog. The open book lies forgotten on a nearby bench, its legends fluttering in the wind, pages turning themselves. The children don't need it now. Their circle itself is the story. Their arms stretch outward, their feet pound the earth, and the sky itself bends with their motion.

I smile at the thought, watching it form behind my eyes, a memory that feels both ancient and immediate. Teaching is this, I realize: not the passing down of old myths, but the noticing of new ones as they happen—fragile, luminous, untamed.

And if I had to close the day with one last thought, I'd wonder what they do after school, after dark, when the world is bathed in twilight, in their imagination.

# Oiseau Mouche (The Hummingbird)

I remembered the hummingbirds in my grandmother's garden, back in Cebu. The sun was heavy there, thick like honey, and the air smelled of guava and stone. One feeder yellow-flowered, one red-flowered, to catch the eye of the tiny birds. Enchanting.

I noticed the anxious hummingbird — the one darting like an emerald jewel on a string, wings always a blur.  Unlike the others, it never fed in peace. It chased every rival away, chittering the air with its tiny fury. Then it hovered before my Lola's verandah, as though it was pleading for more assurance: **Is there enough? Will the sugar run out?**

Lola would shake her head softly, amused. "There are always many feeders and one or the other is always kept refilled," she would say. "One is for the fearful bird, one is for the brave. Which one would you become, *anak*?"

I never knew fear, so I had no answer. I enjoyed watching the birds. Still, the question stayed with me, quiet and unspoken, like a stone in the pocket of my memory, as I grew into adulthood, and the urgency and needs of adulthood shaped my life after the nursing college in Cebu, when my happy graduation became a search for work in the States.

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Now, years later, I am far from Cebu, far from my old home. The scent of antiseptic replaces guava flowers, and the song of tropical birds is drowned by the steady hum of ventilators and monitors. But the hummingbird memory follows me down the bright hospital corridor as I push open the heavy door of the children's cancer ward.

I entered his room quietly, so I wouldn't wake him, carrying a tray of small things: fresh water, clean towels, a rolled blanket. My steps were soft, but the air was still. Then…

*"Am I going to die?"*

Alex's voice was thin but insistent. The question wasn't new. I had heard it before, maybe a dozen times. Always in the same trembling rhythm. Always with hands reaching, tugging at shirt sleeves as if words could hold a body together.

That day it was Dr. Ha-Joon who was caught up, his sleeve clutched by Alex's thin fingers. I saw him bend low, professional, precise. But he was also cool. Dismissive, almost. His tone said: *not now, not here, not for me to answer.*

"There, there," he murmured, brushing the boy's hand free. His words were factual, efficient. He pointed to charts, talked about chemo dosage, white cell count numbers and test intervals. But the space between his syllables was as cold as bathroom tiles.

Alex withdrew into silence, eyes closed, not convinced, not reassured. The question still hovered like an unbanished ghost. I could see it in his face.

I set the tray down and moved with practiced motions, smoothing the sheets and blanket, checking the drip tube needle and hanging bag of chemo solution. I was part of the room, but not the center of it. I listened. I saw in his pleas what others missed.

**I want to break you out of the prison of your small body, Alex, free your worry.**

His eyes opened and turned to me, then away. I did not speak yet. I was not a doctor. I was not his parent, but Alex was my child, in a way. I was something here — a caretaker, a nurse-technician to keep order and calm, the quiet presence at the edges of fear.

Again in my mind, brilliant jeweled wings flashed. The anxious bird hovered before a window, frantic. The memory pressed close, waiting for its moment to reveal. I lingered. Alex lay awake, his small hands resting on the blanket. His eyes opened again, staring at the ceiling, listening to my silence. The his  question came again, softer:

*"Am I going to die?"*

It was asked to the air, to the ceiling, maybe to me. I let silence after hold a breath for a moment, then moved to the edge of his bed.  "When I was a girl, my grandmother kept hummingbird feeders outside her window. Many of them. Always kept full."

Alex blinked, uncertain what truth this brought to him, but listening quietly.

"There was one bird," I continued, "so afraid that the sugar would run out, it chased every other bird away. It never rested. Always guarding, always worried. Yet, when one feeder grew low, there was the other, still full. My Lola used to say: 'There is always enough. One for the fearful bird, one for the brave.'

Are you afraid?"  I whispered.

"I don't know," he sighed.

"That's all right," I replied. "You don't have to know yet. But remember, there is always enough. You can be afraid, or you can be brave. The choice is yours."

He closed his eyes. I smoothed the blanket, adjusted his pillow. The question didn't vanish, it rested now, folded into the memory of blurred wings and that quiet shared moment in a timeless passage of time in a silent hospital room.

When my shift ended, I stepped outside into the pre-dawn cool, touched with stoney dampness. Above the hospital's shadowed garden, moths still flickered in the glow of a lamp, and for a moment I almost saw the shimmer of hummingbird wings.

My cell buzzed. The text: "Pediatric oncology, STAT. Ward eleven." I froze, heart pounding. I was already moving before I was aware, lines on the linoleum blurring.

**Please, not Alex, please God!** I prayed, rounding the corner of the pediatric wing aisle. At the nurses' station, I saw the door to Alex's room propped open. But the bed was empty, fresh sheets and blankets folded neatly. A new pillow.  My heart stopped.

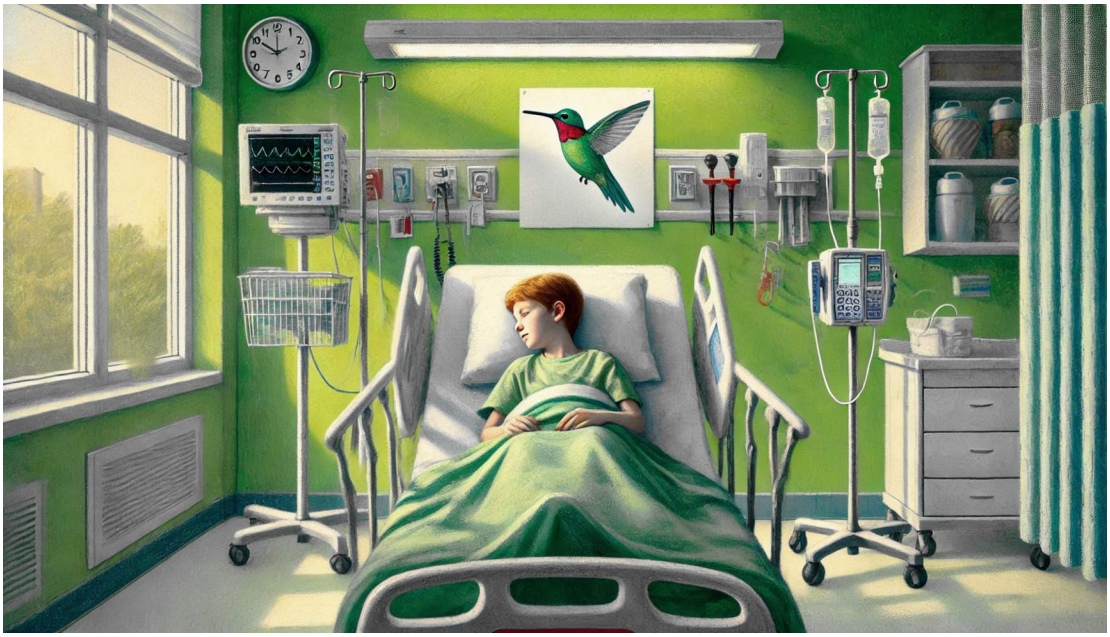
*"Ha-Joon moved him to 11A!*" another nurse said, running past.  We both ran to the call. It was a young girl, paralyzed by a car crash, brought here on life support. She had flat-lined. Her room was filled with a burst of activity, responding to 'Code Blue'.

Ha-Joon looked at her monitor, then ordered chest compressions after we stabilized the girl's neck against trauma. A crash cart rolled in with pads, and he gave her a shot of epinephrine. Our airway management nurses smoothly intubated her.

He compressed the girl's chest in a steady rhythm. Nothing on the monitor. He called for defib paddles, and shocked once, then twice. She came back to us. *Beep…beep….*

Later, after her condition was stable, I pushed open the door on 11A. The room was bright, curtains open. Alex was there, sleeping, small shoulders rising and falling. He was still alive. Maybe in his dream he was silently asking to be brave.

I walked home with lighter steps, carrying him in my heart, and the memory of my Lola in her garden. I hope Alex finds those hummingbirds, too.



# Jar of Fireflies

Alan's first memory was of light. He had grown up on an elm-lined street where the summers were thick with humidity, and the evenings held a secret magic. Fireflies stitched the dusk with their erratic signals, rising from the lawns and hedges like small, wandering sparks at dusk. Their flashes mesmerised him for hours.

He'd linger until the dark grew thick and the fireflies seemed more like stars fallen into the grass than insects at all. Only then would he run inside, thoughts already in his head, certain that tomorrow he would begin to crack the code.

Alan was more like a mendicant monk than a child. His mother understood. *"You were always old,"* she told him once, smiling with the weight of their shared truth.

She was his light. While his brothers threw balls in the yard, she baked pies with him and helped with his homework. She trusted him to roam far and wide. "Did you have a good time, honey? Wash up for supper!" she'd call. No matter how far he ranged, when his bike was set aside for the bus ride into the city, he'd spend entire days in museums and libraries, she'd ask only, "Did you have a good time?"

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Years later, when his own daughter Eleni was ready to balance on two wheels, Alan found the same jar of light in her. “Ready?” he asked, steadying the handlebars.

“I can do this Dad, *watch me!”*

She pushed off before he could answer, wobbled, straightened, and suddenly the air was full of her laughter. She kept that laughter always. Early in pre-dawn, her soft giggling laughter from her room, amusing herself with imaginings while the world slept.

Their summer evenings turned into a shared biking ritual. They pedaled the river trails and backroads, inventing ‘I Spy’ contests as the sky deepened. First to spot a heron, first to spot a wild cherry tree, first to decipher the evening firefly’s code.

“Short-short-long,” she laughed. “That one says *hello, hello, wait!*”

Alan laughed back. “Then answer him back, quick, before he gets away!”

Eleni lifted her hands from the handlebars and flashed her little fingers twice in the air, as he thought: *this is the person I was meant to find. She is always new.* But then — their bike path crossed the highway. Alan had looked back, warning, ‘Be careful!’ Eleni smiled straight at him, ‘I will!” She never saw the car turning into her.

The screech, the thud, the shock that split their lives. Alan threw his bike aside and wailed at the taste of copper in his mouth, the desperate way he shouted her name.

At the hospital, frantic with grief, he waited. Time fractured into beeps and pulses, the steady respiration of ventilators He sat beside her bed, fingers wrapped around hers, signaling softly, ‘short-short-long’ to tether her to the world.

“Remember the fireflies?” he whispered. “Eleni, you hear me? You are still with us.”

By skill, by luck, by doctors who worked until their arms sagged with fatigue — she pulled through. Yet when the casts came off and the crutches were folded away, something terrible remained. Her new bicycle in the garage stood untouched.

“Ride with me?” he asked one bright-blue Saturday, hopeful.

Eleni shook her head. “Not anymore, Dad.”

“Not even around the block?”

“No, Dad. Please. I don’t want to.” Her eyes slid away, to her cell phone, to the private world of friends and messages and laughter that she had built in recovery.

Alan nodded, head down. Inside a storm howled. Rage at the fate, at the stupid blind chance that had broken their lives. Desperation at times, at the inexorable turning of one’s children into teens, and then … to strangers. He had hoped Eleni would ride with him forever, old-alongside-new.

Now he rode alone. And he rode furiously. Miles upon miles, lungs clawing for air. Heart pounding. Wheels spinning streets and paths blurred into asphalt rivers, the wildness pressing close. He chased the fury as if – as if Eleni might be waiting just ahead, laughing with her fingers their firefly semaphore again.

Grief spun him like a wheel until thought blurred. He rode because he could not sit still at home, pedaling through suburbs and country lanes, lungs torn against the dark. Motion was prayer. Tires hummed a mantra. Streetlamps smeared into streaks; stars wheeled sharp above.

Always the same thought: *If I keep riding, maybe I’ll find Eleni again.*

His rides took him farther than he intended, far into the country and a narrow lane at the end of it, tucked behind a weather-beaten stable. Three horses looked up, then went back to their grazing. Lanterns glowed beyond. He dismounted, pushing his bike with trembling legs, past a wooden gate, and found the hidden temple garden.

A pond reflected the first evening stars, filled with yellow irises, white lilies and thin reeds. A frog plopped and disappeared. Moss crept over stepping stones. And in the center, a stone Buddha sat with hands folded, its face softened by seasons of rain.

Fireflies drifted here too, more numerous than he had ever seen. They bobbed over the reeds, glimmered in the maple branches, moved in slow constellations.

Alan sat on a stone bench and let his breath settle. For the first time in months he no longer felt the need to chase, or to flee. Their lights flickered, paused, answering each other in ways he no longer tried to decipher.

Then — a chimera, imagined softly: Eleni's voice beside him, laughing in the dark. *Short-short-long*. *Hello, hello, wait!*

He looked around, throat choking. A firefly blinked near the statue's eye, and for a moment the carved face seemed lit from within. Its eyes were filled with a wisdom — of patience and of their shared presence: *Everything is an illusion of permanance*.

Then Alan understood. His life, his jar of fireflies, was never meant to hold the light. Fireflies blinked and were gone, children grew and drifted away, nothing was fixed. The only secret worth keeping was to watch, to love, to let the light go where it must.

He lifted his hand, giving two clumsy blinks with his fingers. *Short-short-long*.

The firefly on Buddha's face pulsed twice in reply.

Alan smiled, and for the first time in a long while, he felt new again.

# Threads of Light and Smoke

Ami Winlo was ten, small for her age, but inside her mind's eye entire worlds lived, with rivers and mountains, deserts and clouds, all arranged just so. Even in the classroom, under the tired buzz of fluorescent bulbs, Ami found magic. When she raised her hand, her sleeve caught the shimmer, and for a moment she imagined she could pull a silver thread from the air, unspooling it like silk.

Her teacher at Taipei American School was writing on the board. Their assignment, to write a short paper on "Marvels of the Modern World." Ami copied the task down in her note binder. Her eyes drifted to the red cover of the history book, gleaming darker than it should, as though it carried its own inner golden fire. What 'marvels'?

At home the light changed again. Evening poured warm and golden across the table, soft on the bowls and chopsticks, softer still on her mother's face. Ruisi moved quietly, a current beneath the surface, ladling vegetable soup, passing bowls of rice, steadying the rhythm of the family. Tán, her younger brother, made faces with his mouth full, puffing his cheeks, and Ami burst into laughter. In that glow, she felt a circle forming—light around their faces—a light she wanted to keep forever.

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Ruisi placed daikon radish kimchi onto Ami and Tán's plate, to go with the rice. “You were writing something at the table. Is that your school assignment?” she asked Ami.

Ami straightened a little, pushing her school book aside. “It’s called Marvels of the Modern World. We’re supposed to pick marvels that show how the world is made.”

Tán snorted, his round head like baby Buddha. “I pick Spider-Man and Yan!” Yan was that famous Chinese superpowered teen avenging her family's massacre. Ami had always secretly identified with Yan, as maybe a someday ‘woman warrior’ herself.

Ami rolled her eyes. “Not that. Real marvels. Things people made, or found, or built. Or things in nature,” teacher said. “I have to pick two to write a story.”

“And what are the marvels you chose, *xiǎo mèi*?” Ruisi asked.

Ami tapped her chopsticks against her bowl, thinking. “First… hmmm… Escalators, because they carry people upward, like magic stairs that never stop moving. And last—” she hesitated, her voice inquisitive, “Waterfalls, because they’re bigger than ourselves, and they roar like tigers, and they never stop flowing.”

Ruisi closed her eyes for a moment. Her husband, Robert Winlo, Ami and Tán's father, had lost his life climbing a frozen waterfall the year before, in a winter sport accident.

Tán, too young, really, to remember his father, made a dramatic bow across the table, his chopsticks sword in hand. "The Marvelous Temple of Ami, Ruler of Land of Yan!"

Ami laughed, cheeks warming. Her mother reached to steady Tán's rice bowl before it tipped. "Those sound like good choices," Ruisi said. "Remember, marvels are not only what we see, but what we feel too. In your school paper, show how they relate."

After dishes, in her room, Ami opened her schoolbook again. The red cover caught the lamplight, glowing, the pages inside creamy and smooth. She turned them slowly, but soon the words blurred and shifted, refusing to stay still. She began to daydream.

First, of her father, the frozen waterfall he had climbed, and the silence he left behind. They'd been forced to leave Trondheim after his death, and move to Taipei, with Ruisi's parents, until they could apply for Taipei government-subsidized social housing.

Ami found a Marvels page on 'Air Balloons', then one on 'Bicycles'. But something had changed. The pages were no longer paper, but richer and heavier, like napped leather. She felt silly now: Where was, 'Cheese Whiz,' and,... 'Dreamsicles,' and,... 'Escalators'?

Suddenly the room tilted, then dissolved. She was sitting in an old workshop—dim, grinding, humming, dust like pale ghosts in the air. A wheel spun, throwing jewels of light into the shadows. A master craftsman bent close, strong hands guiding the stone.

*'Take this,'* he said, placing a glowing gem onto her palm. The garnet fractured into a dozen landscapes—mountains, rivers, a ribbon of silver unspooling upward, leading somewhere she had never been. Ami looked deep into the gem. Deeper ... deeper ....

The craftroom and the craftsman dissolved, and she found herself on a moving stair, an escalator, gliding over the top of steep mountains. She held the rail, her fingers brushing silvery cobwebs from the air. In the pale sunlight she flew above tree-capped mountains.

Cranes wheeled above, white-and-black feathers against the clouds, and Ami thought:

*‘This is what freedom feels like, to step outside of the past, riding into a new dream.’*

The mountains leaned in close. Mist curled around her like a kitten, and a wide rainbow far above framed a waterfall turning to mist at its base. She wanted to tell her brother, quick, come see, but Tán was already there, leaping, laughing, balancing on nothing.

She followed, heart pounding, until the roar of water swallowed her breath. Rainbows shone within the spray, brighter than any chalk or paint. She stood at the edge, caught between fear and wonder, while her brother soared weightless, as if the world had given him wings. Then the waterfall’s updraft lifted her outstretched arms up into the air too.

Ami shut her eyes and soared higher and higher, circling Tán and those two majestic cranes. Over the roar of the waterfall, she heard a faint, *'Play with me.'* She looked over at Tán, and he seemed to gesture to her, his voice louder, *'Come play with me!'* She felt a tug on her arm, the rainbow light dimmed, and a flurry of snow-white blossoms fell suddenly around her. The blue sky turned conch-pink and pale-green with evening … and she was back in her room. She'd fallen asleep on her open schoolbook.

Tán stood there, tugging her arm, *"Play with me!"* His face was part frown, part mirth.

Ruisi walked in through the open door of their bedroom then. "Alright, mister, it's time to go to sleep! No more play time. Ami, you'll have to write your school assignment later tomorrow, after we get home from the temple. We're going to make a pilgrimage and offering for your Dáda, to let him know we're still safe and well."

Ruisi helped Tán into his pajamas while Ami brushed her teeth, then the two children snuggled into their low pallet beds. Ruisi rolled out a mat for herself to sleep on, in the little spare bedroom of the childrens' Năinai and Yéyye's house, her Chinese parents.

Tán chuckled to himself in a singsong voice. Ruisi shushed him. She thought of Robert, his aching absence, and how his accidental death upended their lives and their futures. Ami lay there, listening to their breath, daydreaming on the ceiling. She was in a dark forest, in a new future, Tán beside her, spirit warriors with their fiery white tigers.

Ahead on their path, a hidden temple, where Lü Dongbin waited — one of the Eight Immortals, smiling in bronze armor, his sword upright like a compass needle. Ami and Tán bowed in respect, and in the stillness, a muffled gong sounded. *Booooong*. Lü Dongbin bowed in return, and swept his arm towards the waiting temple gate, grown richly aged within a grove of Bodhi, Sal and Asoka trees. Then Ami sighed, and slept.

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I woke with the taste of clouds on my tongue and the echo of tiger purrs rumbling in my heart. My dream—the one with the escalator through the mist and the white tigers who let us walk beside—still felt more real than the sunlight poking through the window.

For a second, I was still there, in that spirit world where Tán and I were warriors. Then I blinked, and I was real again, in my room at Năinai and Yéyye's house, with the smell of congee and pickled vegetables drifting down the hall.

"Ami! Tán! Time for breakfast." Mama's voice was like a soft bell, pulling us the rest of the way into the day.

At the table, she placed a steaming bowl in front of me. She was already dressed, not in her usual home clothes, but in a simple shān kù of beige top and brown slacks. "Today, we'll have an adventure," she said. "Up the mountain. To a special place, an old temple."

"A temple?" I asked, my dream, wait … was it a dream?

"Yes. A temple. We will go to…" She paused, choosing her words carefully for Tán. "…send a message to Bàba. To tell him we are thinking of him and that we are well."

Tán, his mouth full of rice, looked up. "Can we send a picture? Of my HIGH GODO?"

Mama smiled, a small, gentle thing that didn't quite reach her eyes. "We will send something better. We will send incense smoke and quiet hopes. They travel farther."

An hour later, we were on a New Taipei bus traveling out of the city. The crowded streets, beeping scooters, tuktuks and bicycles, slowly gave way to mountains. The air changed. In the city, it tasted of exhaust and smelled of fried dough. Out here, it began to taste of damp earth and wild things growing.

We got off at a small lane stop and walked awhile. At the top, another lane, and a ring of tea hut and fruit vendors, little more than wooden shacks with mist-weathered roofs.

“First, we rest,” Mama said, guiding us to a tea hut off a path marked with a smiling Buddha.  An old woman with a face like a walnut shell brought us cups of pale green tea. Tán pointed at a plate of sunflower seed cookies. “Can we send those to Bàba?”

The stone steps behind the hut were ancient, worn smooth and uneven by a *thousand thousand* footsteps. Tán ran on ahead, while Mama and I enjoyed the feeling of entering a mystical realm, one measured step at a time. The stairway climbed steeply into the bamboo forest, that closed around us like a green cathedral.

The air was cool and smelled incredible—like fresh rain and old, sweet wood. Sunlight filtered down in shattered pieces, painting shifting patterns on the path. It was so quiet, the only sounds our breathing and soft crunch of Tán eating his cookies, Bàba forgotten. I half-expected to see one of my dream-tigers padding silently along behind us.

The stone steps ended at a service lane, where a funicular track began. The rails led straight up like an iron ladder, and far above, the service cart was parked. We were lost.

“Let’s see where this goes,” Mama shrugged, and Tán started up with a whee! Using the railroad ties as steps, leaned forward like monkeys, we climbed hand and foot. Tán scrambled ahead of me, giggling, like it was the best playground ever.

As we climbed higher, the world dropped away. Through the gaps in the trees, I could see the entire valley, the river a silver ribbon, and our new city a hazy smudge of gray and white in the distance. It looked small and quiet from up here.

Finally, we pulled ourselves over the last ledge and onto a vast, flat stone verandah.

It was like stepping into my dream. The world had opened up to a vista. The forested mountains hunched like sleeping dragons on our left. Straight ahead, the verandah's edge fell away into nothingness, offering a dizzying, breathtaking view of the valley and the distant city skyline.

And on our right, rising from the mountain itself, was the temple. Its curved roof, layered like the wings of a giant bird, was topped with glazed tiles that shimmered in the light. A huge wooden door, dark red and carved with coiling dragons, stood open, silent and waiting.

It was utterly quiet. We were the only people there.

Mama led us toward the entrance. "This is a place of peace," she whispered. Her voice was low and full of something I hadn't heard before—a kind of sure, deep calm. "We leave the noisy world behind."

Just inside the main hall, an old monk sat on a stool, his eyes closed. Before him was a small table with three bundles of long, thin joss sticks. Mama placed a few yuan in a wooden box and took one bundle. She handed one stick each to me and Tán, keeping three for herself.

She led us to a large, black iron incense burner in the center of the courtyard, its belly full of gray ash. With a long match, she lit her three sticks. They caught flame, a bright orange star, which she gently waved until it died, leaving the ends glowing red and smoking.

"Watch," she whispered.

She held the sticks at her forehead, closed her eyes, and stood perfectly still for a long moment, her lips moving silently. She then bowed deeply three times, forward from her waist, before carefully placing her smoldering sticks upright into the ash of the burner.

“Your turn,” she said softly. “Light your stick from mine. Think of Bàba. Send him your message. It can be a word, a picture in your mind, a feeling. Then bow three times, to show respect.”

Tán went first, his little face screwed up in intense concentration. He whispered, “I got a new toy. It’s silver and red. He’s HIGH GODO!” Tán gave three quick, clumsy bows and stuck his joss stick into the burner.

Then it was my turn. I held the tip of my stick to the glowing embers of Mama’s until a thin thread of smoke began to curl into the air. I closed my eyes.

What was my message? *'I miss you'* felt too small. *'Why did you go?'* felt too big.

A picture came into my head. It was from my dream last night. It was me and Tán, not as we are, but as we were, warriors with the white tigers: strong and unafraid, walking together through a beautiful, mysterious world.

I thought of that feeling—not of being protected, but of being a protector. Of being connected to something ancient and powerful. We are okay, I thought, pouring the feeling into the smoke. We are strong. We are together.

I opened my eyes, bowed three times—slowly, respectfully, the way Mama had—and placed my joss stick with theirs. The three thin lines of smoke twisted together into a single column, rising straight up into the still air before the mountain breeze caught it and carried it away over the valley.

It was a quiet so complete it had its own sound – the sound of the mountain breathing. And then, another sound joined it.

*Booooong*.

It was deep and vast, a vibration you felt in your chest before you heard it with your ears. It was the temple bell.

I leaned my head against the cool glass and replayed the sound of the bell in my mind, sending it like a message to a memory, and to the future. It rang again and again.

*Booooong…. We are okay, Bàba.*

*Booooong…. We are strong.*

*Booooong…. We are together.*

*Booooong…. We are warriors.*

# Afterword

So what do you think?

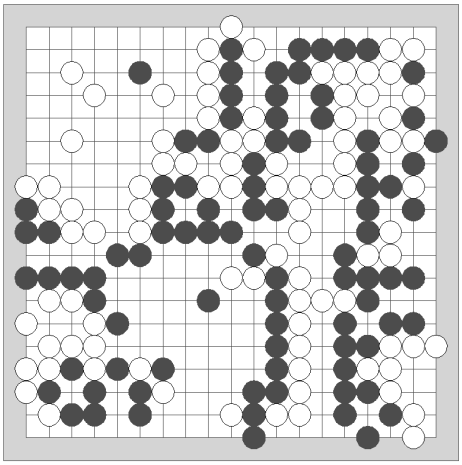
*The Book of Marvels* began without any plan. It was the one surprise image—a man's silhouette on a bridge at sunset, an ancient woods, … *with luminous winged faeries!* You saw *'Amarcord Twilight'*. We ran with that, a desire to grab hold onto 'The Vibe'.

There were no outlines, no storyboards, no studios. Nothing! And yet, somehow, each composition carried the next into being—and we followed that craft. Sometimes images or prose arrived from nowhere, in languages unknown. Some exploded into being! You saw the *'Sermon for a Shattered God.'* Wow! Sometimes they had waited until the last moment, the phrase dropping, that touching précis in '*The Rainmaker's Daughter'*.

We don't pretend to understand how. We know only that this process felt *zwischenzeit*: 'the rift between two worlds', and that makes you, the reader, a Star Traveller with us. We hope you enjoyed this collaboration, as a brief relief from the 'Age of the Long Now'.

—The Authors

Shout out to PN6231.C64 B54 2024, who refers to our collaboration as:
*'The Art-Limerick Howling Blind Monk Book of Destiny'*



AlphaGo Master AI - Final Go Board

***The Book of Marvels*** **takes you on an incredible journey through worlds of art & prose that defy imagination!**

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